

Mr. Gresham ==
== *and* Olympus
NORMAN LINDSAY

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MR. GRESHAM AND OLYMPUS

By Norman Lindsay

THOUGH his reputation as an artist is world wide, Norman Lindsay had never written a novel until last year, when **EVERY MOTHER'S SON** was published. The book was banned in Mr. Lindsay's own country, Australia, but received high critical praise as well as general popularity in England and America. His new novel is the story of the talented and erratic Gresham family, every member of which is rich material for a full novel; of the misunderstandings between child and parent and husband and wife; and particularly of the flaring up of the last spark of passion and romance in the heart of a man of fifty. Mr. Lindsay writes like no one else, with brilliance, irony and violence.



MR. GRESHAM
and OLYMPUS

BOOKS BY NORMAN LINDSAY

A CURATE IN BOHEMIA

THE MAGIC PUDDING

CREATIVE EFFORT:


ESSAYS ON LIFE AND ART

NORMAN LINDSAY'S BOOK NO. 1

NORMAN LINDSAY'S BOOK NO. 2

MR. GRESHAM AND OLYMPUS

EVERY MOTHER'S SON



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MR. GRESHAM
AND OLYMPUS



Norman
Lindsay

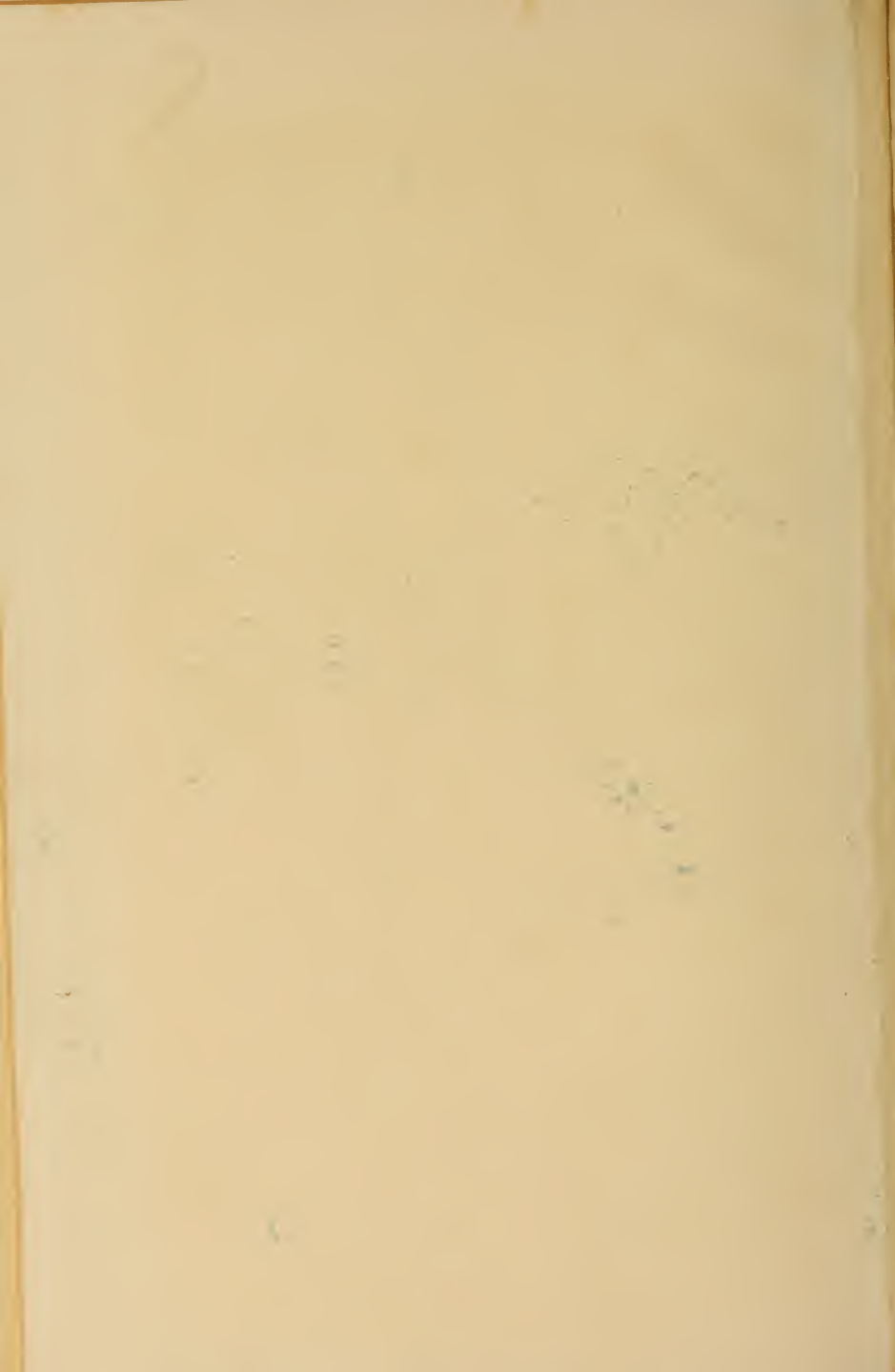
Author of
"EVERY MOTHER'S
SON"

**FARRAR &
RINEHART**

Mr. Gresham and Olympus

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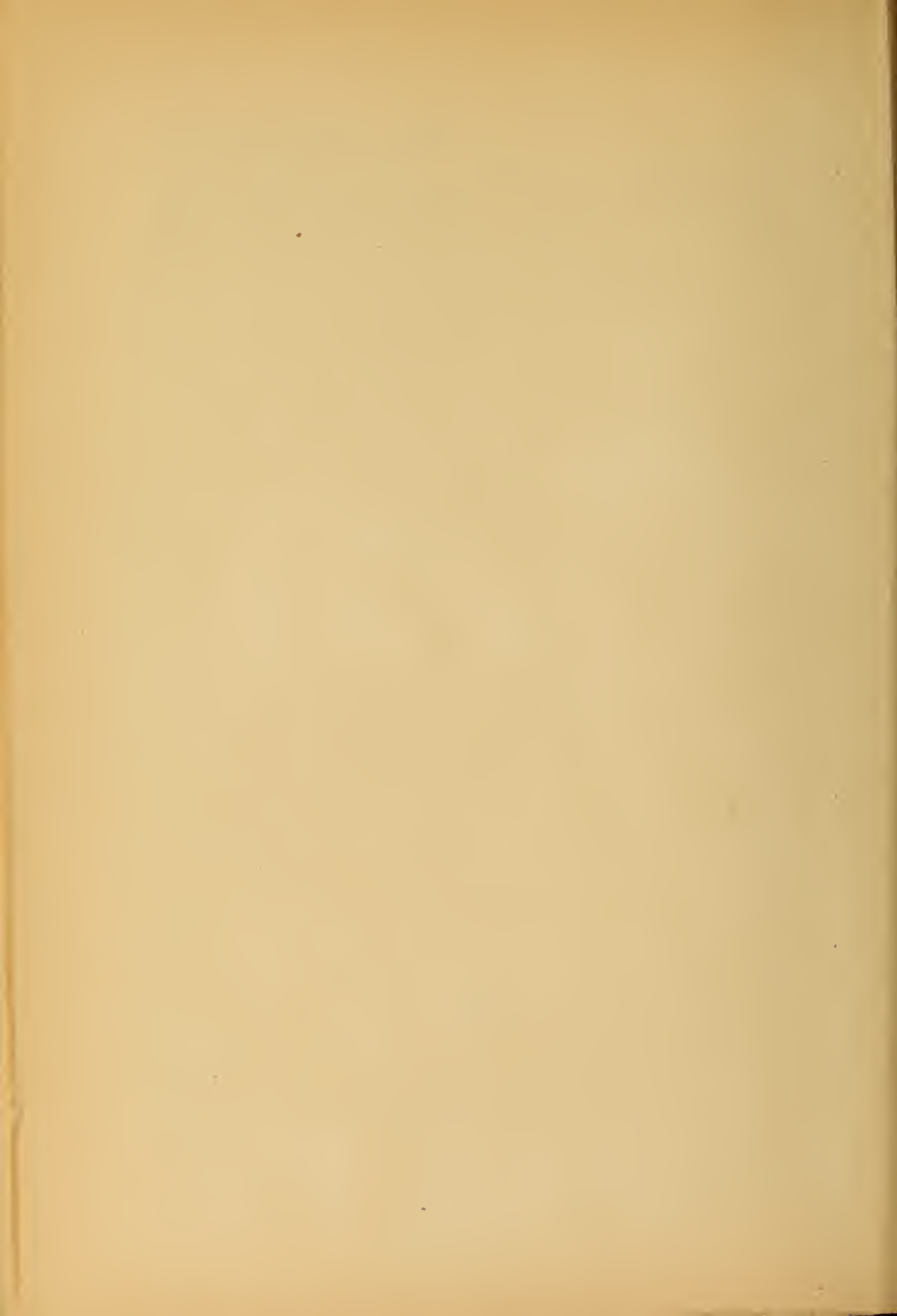
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MR. GRESHAM
and OLYMPUS



CHAPTER ONE

ZIP—zip—zip—, the tripping flight of women's shoes; high heeled with pointed toes; mincing away to a feminine infinity and lost forever.

Absurd! In a room three stories above George Street no ear could pick out so slight a motive as women's feet from the rumble of a big city. Annoyed with himself, Gresham turned attention back to his table and went on with the sketch plan of a portico with slim Ionic pillars.

There was a nip of winter still in the air, but the sunlight of early spring came through the west windows of the big decorous room, patterning in reverse a gold lettering on their glass of "Gresham and Floyd. Architects."

Woman's shoes be damned! A vague unrest at the back of Gresham's mind had pressed itself into consciousness by that symbol of life's frustrated adventure.

Sensibly frustrated, you understand. No man with a sense of humour wants to make a fool of himself over women at the age of fifty. At least, he does not wish to make a fool of himself, which comprehends running after women.

Gresham referred stultifications there back to his sketch. Those Ionic pillars depressed his eye, bored by a million replicas of them. He took another sheet of paper and began to rough out the design of a massive support in flat barbaric forms with a lintel of Cretan bull's heads. . . .

The exercise lightened two vertical lines at the indent

of a long sensitive nose. He was a type often stranded between aesthetics and affairs, tall and thin with precise features but plenty of back to his head. Refined hands and well cut clothes. Better looking than he thought himself, though not so good looking as a woman might have thought him, even at fifty. In the presence of others he was always amiable.

All amiable men are liars; they have gaged hate and devised an exterior to muddle its attack. Still, one can't buffoon a pose of politeness for fifty years without paying its price of self contempt, and Gresham's scepticism of values frankly included himself. That is one way of dodging values. The expression of indifference that lost interest in finishing the barbaric portico was automatic.

Floyd came in from the other room slouching and filling his pipe. Burly and untidy, with brushed up black hair and a square face split by a tolerant grin, he came across and glanced at Gresham's two porticos.

"Designed for rejection," he said at the barbaric sketch.

"That! I was only fooling. Put this stodge into the thing." He pushed over the Ionic portico. "No use trying anything on our Antipodian Babetts. They know enough to know that if they don't watch us we might give them something really good."

"Good thing, too."

Floyd never qualified a statement, allowing his tolerant grin to do that for him.

"Yes, I know your theory:—keep everything at its lowest mental level and life becomes worth living. So it does, on the principle of not being worth living."

"Not my theory; I prefer designing factories."

"Factories aren't designed."

"Exactly."

Gresham lit a cigarette from the box on the table. Its polished surface had nothing else on it but pencils and a wad of cartridge paper. Floyd made the scale plans for the facile designs that slipped off Gresham's pencil. Everything in the room was fastidious and austere; a polished floor with rugs, leather covered lounge chairs, a large carved press. No indecent exhibit of business permitted. Of late, Gresham suffered spasms of detestation for that room. This was one of them, and he tried to put a little of it off on Floyd.

"I wonder if you get through life as complacently as you pretend to," he said.

"Well, I get through it."

"You aren't married, of course. And you keep a bull terrier, and still go to prize fights. Do you still believe that stray tarts exist?"

"Sometimes."

"Sounds as if you'd succeeded in perfecting life."

"Life's already perfect."

"Yes, when you understand the principle that designed it to be exactly what it is; perfectly imbecile."

"What more amusing spectacle do you want than a lunatic asylum?"

"Oh, even lunatics can be overdone."

The clang of the lift without ejected a disturbance into the passage vociferating a conflict of opinion. Gresham frowned and erased the frown; Floyd grinned, showing a line of large teeth gripping his pipe. The door was burst open and two youths fell into the room shouting, "Joyce—ascetic revolt.—Rot! Modern idiom be damned; dynamite and diarrhoea—Rot! Coprophilia plus a relaxed subconscious—Rot!". . .

Entrance to a decorous room with two calm adults in it drenched these outcrys. One youth pulled himself up with a jerk that jerked a hiccup out of him; the other reached the table and arrested himself with a fine effect of instantaneous sobriety.

At a glance, he was Gresham's son; a slim fellow with a flashing profile and fine wide open eyes, tremendously sincere. His soft chestnut hair was too long and he wore a disreputable hat on it anyhow. Both lads were in their twenties and there emanated from both that fustiness of an unventilated existence peculiar to slovenly youths and very old men. Though young Gresham's clothes were good he was distinctly dirtier than his friend, who was very dirty.

"Hallo dad, hallo Bill"—(that was Floyd). "Glad I caught you in; most important. We've been all over town trying to raise—It's about poor old Brindle. He was run in last night—not really drunk, but the cops have got him set. And his wife won't bail him out. My God! what a bitch——"

"A woman, mind you," interjected the other youth with horror. He had one of those pale green faces which go with a lot of greasy black hair and an unshaven chin.

"A bitch! She followed poor old Brindle down the street screaming that he'd deserted her and taken all her money. The cops collared him and made him give it back. My God!!!"

"A woman, mind you."

The green-faced lad required that man's awful lot as woman's martyr should not be overlooked by these, his peers, here assembled.

"A bitch! She earns five quid a week, too. Got a

job and poor old Brindle hasn't done a stroke for months——”

“Yes, yes, but what's it all about, Wally?” said Gresham impatiently.

“Dad.” Wally confronted his parent solemnly, conscious of generosity about to be conferred on him. “I know I've stuck you already this week,—I know I'm a bastard, but—can you let us have two—three quid to get poor old Brindle out of quod?”

Reluctantly, Gresham dredged up three notes and handed them to Wally, who took them with a fine, but reticent emotion.

“Like you, dad. Can't say more than that. I'm a bastard but——”

The green one waved concessions to generosity aside. Man's nobility to man was understood.

“Essential,—save old Brindle,” he said, but Wally pushed him to the door, anxious to spare his parent a too great consciousness of worth. There, with a brisk return to casual matters, he said, “Oh, by the way, dad, I got ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ for you at Dymocks, stuck it to your account. There's a new one out by Stekel, ‘Impotence in Men.’ I've ordered it; book you can't afford to miss. . . .”

Full of zeal and purpose, he vanished, leaving behind him a parent justifying all that a worthy offspring could desire him to be. Gresham nodded dispeptically at Floyd.

“What can you do with the young blighter?” he asked.

“Borrow money from him,” grinned Floyd.

“There's a nemesis in this, Bill, wrong end first. When I was his age, my old man was constantly bor-

rowing from me. Whenever he came a financial crash he always landed it blandly on my neck."

"Worthy parent; full sense responsibility to a son."

"Yes, it annoys me to think that he generated in me the money-making conscience. I had to make enough to keep the family he refused to keep. A magnificent old fraud, too, always in a good humour and had a hell of a good time with women and booze up to the last. There's your conception of a statistically perfect earth, Bill. I remember those hard drinking old jossers of the eighties and nineties. They may have lived under a repressed social system, but they weren't repressed."

"Of course not. Give the wowser complete control and he turns life into a secret ritual and has all the liquor and prostitutes he needs."

"Yes, I know. In those days Australia was the drunkenist country on earth and every sixth house was a brothel, and on the surface it was a ghastly miasma of Wesleyan Methodism."

"And what is it now?"

"Now! Don't ask me. I see a freed imagery in poetry and art fighting for breath and a vast automatic impulse of mob inertia trying to stifle it. You can see what's happening; the people are rationally sober and prostitutes hardly exist. The wowser's secret ritual of debauch is gone; he's turning the spleen of his repressed lust on an effort to destroy free expression in the arts. Look at these imbecile censorships of books and motion pictures——"

"Yes, very funny. I see Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis' was censored the other day as an indecent work."

"Yes, it is funny; funny as the spectacle of a people morally damned can be funny."

Gresham got up impatiently and moved to the windows, where spring's sunlight shone thinly through the haze over Sydney.

"This place is what our generation has *not* made it, Bill," he said. Floyd was amused at an outcry that overlooked the frankly base understanding that at fifty there are no values in anything.

"Suffering a delayed attack of adolescent bad conscience?" he asked.

"Me? Absurd. No, the spectacle of Australia was pressed on me by the spectacle of young Wally. You can see behind that smoke screen of booze and a tremendous pretense of taking life seriously. They take nothing seriously. Why should they? Man is *too* exposed as a destructive moron; why should they bother to pit their wits against him? They are too intelligent, these young moderns, and one must endorse their wisdom. They intend to smash the earth by a scornful repudiation of the will to work."

"Modernity hasn't smashed; it's a religious revival."

"That's the worst sort of smash."

"Dionysius as Messiah."

"All Messiahs are evil."

"You're an optimist; you want a rational and dignified earth."

"Horrible thought; I suppose I do."

He came back to the table and fussed about it irritably.

"The fact is, Bill, to make this business of life work one must discard motives and stick to surface antics, and in the terms of a crude convention Wally is a boozy young waster. He won't work and doesn't intend to."

"Why should he; you give him an allowance?"

"I give him a wretched two quid a week, enough to keep him and no more. The understanding was that if he was kept he would be free to work. In two years he's made a few sporadic attempts at a novel and been chucked out of half a dozen jobs on newspapers."

"He has the art of getting the sack."

"Yes. He has the art of believing in his own disguise of innocence, too. He can write, you know. Some of his prose is extraordinarily good——"

"So is his talk; I enjoy it immensely."

"So do I, when he's sober. The real nuisance about our relations is that I like him very much. I believe he likes me, too."

"That's what's wrong with him."

Gresham renounced the company of a too intelligent friend by reaching for his hat. He glanced round for something to read on the boat across the harbour and picked up the American *Mercury*.

"Do what you like about that portico; I won't be in on Monday. I'll finish the inside designs for the Century Theatre at home. They'll be bad enough to suit even your conception of a perfect earth."

No jeer penetrated Floyd's grin; he could do that sort of thing better for himself. That was his charm to Gresham, who was able to work off the disgraces of a defaced intellect by slinging them at Floyd. But after Gresham's fifty years of Australia, self respect had no other resource but to make a joke of itself, which is quite another thing to being made a joke of.

He turned down George Street, making for Circular Quay, walking with the preoccupied air of a man who protects himself from looking at a stale scene. Perhaps he had ceased to look at life; or thought he had. But thought dies in the inertia of a crowded street. . . .

At the Quay he quickened his pace to the tempo of people hastening from trams to the ferries for the northern suburbs across the harbour. A practiced glance told him he had just time to catch the Milson's Point boat, which he did by leaping the widening space of water as the ferry sheared off from the wharf.

On the upper deck he relaxed from the tension that follows a transit from earth to the charm of gliding over smooth water. As usual, his glance turned to the half finished harbour bridge, with its giant chords extending blindly up and out; the two creeper cranes perched on their extremities like absurd insects squatting on their rumps and reaching antennae into space.

It annoyed his sense of proportion, that bridge, out of all relation to its setting. It diminished nature; turned stately foreshores into molehills.

"They'll have to move into the dimensions of that bridge or be flattened out by it," he thought. "But of course the first shell pumped into Sydney will blow it to blazes."

He forgot the bridge there to look at something else; a girl. That girl . . .

Gresham at fifty may have ceased to look at life but he was not quite dead, for he did sometimes look at girls. Not that he charged the look with any message of their desirability; his glaze of amiable detachment was at its best when he looked at them. If they looked at him in return he ceased to be aware of them in a polite friendly way.

Not funk;—he denied that firmly. The good taste of an intellectual hedonist who rejects middle-age as a vehicle for the passions. All the same, whenever he saw that tall girl with the little virgin's head poised on a long neck, she troubled the radius of his eyes,

and left him with a vague unrest when she moved out of it. He knew her well by sight, but then, he also knew a lot of other girls by sight. When one is singled out, an image of her must be busy too. Perhaps an obstructed canon of femininity sought to release itself in looking at that girl, with her big breasts, slim waist and very big hips, which gave an excessive naïveté to her little fair foolish face.

A form imagist playing on a lewd fancy had made her up. She played up to him, too, by tilting her head backwards and drooping her heavy eyelids with the dazed expression of a medium about to indulge in trance. At intervals a pink tongue came unexpectedly out and licked her lips, which showed that she was not in a trance but thinking of some rare thing. . . .

Gresham opened his magazine and turned it back at Mencken's editorial. She may not have been looking at him, but her seat was opposite his and that directed her inattention at him. With a sudden effect of refreshment he went on reading Mencken.

But he glanced up as the boat reached Milson's Point, anxious for a last spoil of her excessive modulations. She opened her eyes wide a moment, surprised to find herself on a boat, and resigned herself to the trouble of standing up to walk off it. Gresham noted that she had forgotten her handbag, and picked it up. She walked with her body slightly tilted forward, which gave an attractive waddle to her heavy thighs.

"You left this," said Gresham.

"Oh, thanks, silly of me——"

They smiled vaguely, exchanging nods. The gangway clattered aboard and Gresham let her go ahead of him. She did not look back and he did not overtake her.

Very annoying, these frustrated episodes. He suffered a conviction of feeble-mindedness for not making something of the event as he went to the garage for his car, and steered it expertly out into the heavy traffic pulling up the steep incline from the punt.

But cars, like streets, absorb the nerve tension of an existence speeded up by them. The Gordon Road carried an incessant stream of traffic at that hour, and Gresham was able to suspend his annoyance on attention to steering. It was a three quarters of an hour run to where he turned off above Pymble along the old convict road that led to Narrabeen and the sea. Here on the heights it was lined with orchards and country houses; handsome enough places set in fine gardens.

By that time Gresham had got rid of irritation over a triviality and was thinking, “. . . After all, the reward of middle-age is that it makes a joke of desire. Impossible to intellectualize emotion. As for action, what can that mean but making a fool of oneself chasing flappers about. . . .”

At the same time it was nice of that girl to leave her bag; equally nice if she had intended to leave it or had really forgotten it. Even a subconscious invitation to adventure is worth having to a purely academic hedonist of fifty. But then she might have left it for someone else to pick up; some worthy youth whose initiative he had brigandized. That thought threw him back to annoyance again. . . .

At the little village of Key Heights he slowed down, noticing that his petrol gauge was low. A few loitering bucolics and the local policeman populated its section of main road lined with small shops, a Mechanics Institute and a garage. A single seater car blocked his

way to the petrol pumps, and Gresham recognised Nina's black bobbed head leaning from it as she talked to Jim Guthrie, the tall young mechanic who owned the garage. He detached himself without haste as Gresham's car edged in and Nina drew hers out.

"How much, Mr. Gresham?"

"Six will do, Jim."

Nina leaned from her car to watch the filling and called,

"That tank's got an air lock, Jim."

"Yes, I know, Nina."

He had a nice voice, that lad; charmingly modulated. Not an Australian voice, though Jim was an Australian. A tall fair fellow with vaguely astonished eyes. A lot of returned soldiers had that look, as though a high explosive uproar had shattered the validity of life, and they waited for a conviction of reality to replace it. Jim was thirty-five, but he had gone to the war in his teens, and still kept a displaced time factor of youth about him. But Nina called sharply back to Gresham there,

"Look here, dad, now that the surfing season's started you'll have to leave us the Sunbeam and take this rotten thing to town. Or else buy us a new sedan. I was just talking to Jim about it."

"Were you? Then I suppose that settles it."

He nodded to Jim and moved out, with another nod of tolerance for Nina's hard little voice, though that dictatorial air that she used especially to him annoyed him slightly. Nina was twenty-one, and she had not yet found the proper inflection of contempt for parents, though she practiced it a good deal.

Gresham's house was a mile from Key Heights, and where his car came over the rise on which it stood one

looked across rolling scrub covered hills away to the sand dunes and the sea, lost now in the fall of evening. Only the lagoon on the flats below Key Heights picked up the last shimmer of light from the west.

All that was a sterilised act of looking for Gresham; he had seen it for twenty-five years. Eyes bothered by theories of decorating nature end by rejecting her in the rough. But then, Gresham looked with a satiated eye at his finely designed house and grounds, though he always responded with pleasure to the long avenue of South Coast Palms which were now a stately colonnade thirty feet high. But no architectural eye can quite get away from columns.

He ran the car smoothly into the garage and stopped it precisely a foot from the end wall, like a machine that couldn't go wrong; a depressed analogy with the mechanics of existence. When he stepped down he felt suddenly tired. . . .

On the drying lawn behind the house he stooped to pick up a small square of card with a pen and ink drawing on it. Under the light from the kitchen courtyard he stopped to examine it. Examining it, he frowned.

It was a work done with a certain spirit, begotten of a metier still extant on the walls of Pompeii, and sold to tourists in the Palais Royal arcades. Gresham recognised the stylist, young Jerry. . . .

Silly young devil, dropping his pornographic nonsense about like that. Harmless enough, but—

In his private work room, which was half studio and half library, Gresham flicked on the light, vacillating over a parental dilemma. He ought to speak to that young fool, if only to advise discretion over the practice of pornography in the home. With the abruptness of

a pumped-up resolution he passed down the passage that led to the kitchen courtyard.

The kitchen was in a clatter of preparing dinner, but across the paved yard was a wing that had once been servants' quarters till Gresham had built a separate apartment away from the house for his cooks and maids. Now the old rooms were used to store lumber in, and one of them was young Jerry's bedroom. He preferred its detachment, as marking the habitat of a conscious isolate in the home.

His door was three inches open, but a chair piled with books obstructed entrance. Gresham had to push the door against the obstruction to get in, and Jerry glanced round from his table at an intrusion. He had a drawing pinned to a slanted board and his pen was poised over it.

Gresham paused, embarrassed. From that he recovered to toss down the sketch with a casual air.

"I found this on the drying lawn. No particular harm in that sort of thing, but I wish you wouldn't drop specimens about."

Jerry sullenly identified the specimen without looking at his father. His thin face with its long nose and uneasy full lips repudiated a most unwarrantable intrusion on his private affairs.

"That—that's only a bit of rot," he muttered.

"I know. Still, there's a convention abroad that makes a fuss over having its repressions exploded in those terms. I think I'd defer to it if I were you."

Jerry said nothing; what could he say? His scowl accented rejection of a parent and remained at that. He was nineteen, an awkward age for any father to select an idiom for an easy exchange of opinion. Ill at ease, Gresham assumed the matter disposed of by

glancing over the pen drawing on the board. In a laborious technique, it presented a convention of Adonis being importuned by a very over-modelled Venus.

"H'm, not bad as a composition," said Gresham, "but don't you think you had better stick to line for the present? Tone is a deuce of a problem with the pen."

"Oh, that; that's only a dam' thing I was fooling with."

Gresham nodded placably and got out of the room. In his own room again he peevishly endorsed Jerry's rejection of himself.

"Hang it, I should have torn up that thing and said nothing. But—silly little devil, he ought to meet me half way on the awkward job of being a father. He's always on guard; a pose of resistance to the repressions of the home. And there are no repressions here; he couldn't have a more decent parent than I am. My vice, I suppose; a father ought to be a nuisance. And Baby's worse than I am; she always did evade maternal consciousness. . . ."

The while Jerry was tearing and retearing up that sketch and spitting fury at it, though after all it was only a bit of doggerel verse decorated by two pairs of feet sticking out from under an umbrella.

"Damn the old man—blast the old man—," he was hissing, getting all he could out of an excess of spleen designed to transfer an undignified exposure to his father.

From that he desisted with sudden alarm to dart at a cupboard suspended over his bed and fumble underneath it. At the click of a hidden catch its side opened in the function of a door. Its door had a knob and a lock and hinges, but was nailed up. Otherwise keys can be found for locks, and doors opened.

Delving into it, Jerry lugged out a jumble of papers and sketches and note books and went rapidly through them. Whatever he sought was not there and he dashed at the chest of drawers and lugged out the lower drawer, which permitted him to get at another hidden catch and disclose the fact that there was a false bottom to the chest of drawers, also filled with papers. "I wonder if I dropped that dam' thing too?" he was muttering. . . .

With a sound of relief he pounced on a sketch, ratified it as the one sought and thrust it away again, and the false bottom into place and the drawer on top of that. In a fresh alarm he bundled the contents of the cupboard back and shut its false door. Then he observed the displaced chair and pushed it into position. By this device you could not be surprised suddenly, for by the time the door was pushed open whatever drawing or novel or letter to a girl you were busy with could be pushed under your drawing board, on which was always pinned a composition to account for your industry in private.

Partly relieved at having put his defences in order, Jerry sat down and again cursed that torn up design. He could not remember putting it in his pocket, which he must have done to account for its arrival on the lawn. He was always forgetting precautions about those damned things, unaware that he thereby protested at doing them. They were currency among the youths of Key Heights, who bothered him for them. He had promised that one to Herb Puncheon, and now he would have to do it again. . . .

On Jerry's walls were prints of Titian's Venus of the Tribuna, Helena Fourment in the fur robe, Klinger's Cirene, and a number of Kley's pen drawings. On a

shelf were a few battered books, Shakespeare, The Three Musketeers, Don Quixote, A Legend of Montrose, the Contes Drolatiques and Rabelais. He read these works as an obsessed parasite on their imagery, which he transferred to consciousness by illustrating them.

Of course he illustrated his own novels too. He was always beginning a new novel in a tremendous stir of expectation and abandoning it when he had written the perfect love episode, which usually forced itself into the second chapter and then there was nothing else to write about. His secret hiding places were crammed with wads of turgid MSS., with the first page very carefully written, the next less so, and all the rest scribbled anyhow, with scrawlings up the margins and loblolly passages out of place, and sentences scribbled out and sentences dribbling away into spirals and patterns and girls' faces. . . .

Life's frustrations muddled at their most inspired source.

In a temper, Jerry decided that he would not dine with the family after the old man making a fool of him like that. With the practiced art of keeping his movements under cover he slid round to the pantry and selected three mince pies, a slab of cake and a section of German sausage, and got into the garden with them, avoiding attention from the front verandah. It was softly lit by masked lights, and voices were there.

Just then his father appeared at the open glassed doors to say in casual greeting, "Hallo, Ronny." His voice went up a tone, expressing pleasure. "Is that you, Drake? Glad to find you here."

"Thanks. But it's dashed hard to tear oneself away from here."

That voice had a slight drawl; a faint depreciation of seriousness in anything said by it. But it used words as finished things; an English voice. Ronny's had a cocksure staccato note coming after it. "Shall I get the cocktails, Baby?"

"Do, Ronny, Walter is a wretched host. Oh, is that dinner already?"

A gong sounded. Over the bushes Jerry observed a group dawdle at going in; his mother's figure in a fragile drape attended by two opaque male forms. That was a convention of Baby Gresham anywhere, and doubtless accounted for a woman of forty still artlessly labelled Baby.

At the front gate of the drive Jerry dodged again because Nina in the two seater was coming along at top speed and she swerved inwards on a curve that missed the stone gate post by inches and scooted up the drive like a mad thing.

Speed! Is that a voltage to catch life or run away from it?

"Silly young cow," said Jerry austerely.

Munching, he drifted up the road, secure and happy. In this soft dark space of night one was free and one hid. Its only annoyance was that at intervals the road was blurred by a halo of light and two glaring headlamps hove into view, smashing the darkness while an ass of a car pelted past, carrying its load of human imbecility to trouble other spaces of the night.

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE grassed sand dunes above Key Heights lagoon Jerry Gresham sprawled with his friend Peter Tregear.

It was hot up there, but they liked the sun's narcotic to the restless limbs of adolescence. Lying down, one saw the grey green grass turn edges of pure silver to the light; sitting up, one blinked at its glitter flicked back from sand and water.

It was Sunday, and a gay day on the sea beaches, which reversed the death of life it inflicted on inland towns. Little kids pattered about down there at the edge of the lagoon, watched by mothers and aunts and grandmas, boys and dogs sported all day in its waters, shrilling and barking and paddling canvas canoes, and fighting like demons for next turn at the paddle. The drift of continents had pushed back the sea that boys and dogs might have lagoons in which to live the only life. Betimes a pair of bathing costumes with brown arms and legs strolled over the sand drift from the ocean, the youths bare headed and the girls in large Mexican hats clipped on by a jaunty chin strap. Where they dipped out of sight one might come on them later lolling in a sand hollow, brown limb to limb, talking languidly into each other's faces.

Here at the lagoon earth and sand met, and their denizens met too; the gay beach peoples and the bucolics from the orchard districts. One could tell these by the ill ease of their clothes, their ties and collars

and hats. No sea beacher wore such foolish things. These bucolics herded in little groups, masking incompetence with girls by the approach collective, which allowed them to sing out invitations of approach in safety. They loitered about the path which skirted the lagoon or lay in the shade of a few Norfolk Island pines, and squabbles of argument came up from them to the dunes above.

Jerry was saying in a gruntulous monologue, "I hate living at home; I hate this hanging about with nothing to do. If a man only knew where to go to get things started—The old man:—all very well for him to talk:—stick to line, and all that. What does he know about the pen. He's not bad with the pencil; I'll own that, but God! always drawing those damned doorways——"

"Stinking luck him finding that sketch," admitted Peter.

"The stinking thing was that I only did it for Herb Puncheon. I'm sick of doing them, too, and I suppose the old man thinks I did the damn thing for myself."

"All the same, Jerry, your old man's not a bad sort," said Peter seriously.

Peter was a big fellow, short nosed and pugnacious, but his brown eyes adored Jerry. Jerry adored Peter. Friendship for them was in the only stage that friendship can exist, still on the borderland of adolescence, before the terrors of a defeated ego get to work on it.

"Look at my old man," said Peter. "Blooming old trap-mouthed codfish, making me go in for law. To hell with law. Your old man doesn't push that sort of rot onto you; he lets you alone."

"Yes. I know. It's not that——"

Jerry scowled, unable to define what that was. A resistance to the whole content of home and parents

clouded his mind; a potent menace, which words refused to account for. From that he rolled over frantically and scratched his backside, where the sun's burning glass had been busy. For a flash the expression of his face was one of pure agony, but that was only the spirit grasping at the flesh for a submerged idiom. Perhaps he arrived at its crudest symbol when he added impatiently,

"I wonder how the hell a man makes money."

"That's a thing that beats me too, I mean outside taking a rotten job you don't want to take."

"Of course I can draw a bit."

"And I've got my fiddle. Fat lot of good that is with all this canned music about."

"I suppose I could get trade work to do."

"Yes, I suppose I could do a bit of journalism."

Jerry put an arm round Peter's shoulder.

"All the same, Pete, you and me will always stick together."

That roused Peter. He thumped a heavy arm round Jerry and both gazed proudly at each other.

"You and me, Jerry."

"You and me, Pete."

"Old Jerry."

"Old Pete."

Jerry felt tremendously sincere; Peter was tremendously sincere. Bisexuality cast a terrified glance into the future, where conflict with the daemon might perish of homosexual inanition. Without knowing it, Jerry uttered its threat to a completed ego.

"Frightful to think how hard girls are to get."

"With girls everywhere."

"Millions of them."

An incredible parsimony of earth confounded them.

They gazed blankly about, as if by a divine rationality girls might appear, offering love. From a collective vision of the feminine, Peter's eye suddenly specified a rare specimen.

"There's Florrie Candler."

Jerry looked with interest. Florrie and another girl dawdled on the path below, swaying languidly together and exchanging diverting and obviously scandalous intimacies, by the silvery trill of Florrie's laugh. That laugh of Florrie's was a gift; it disposed of decorum on the spot. She had other gifts; full breasts, long thighs, a golden skin and gilded hair, that picked up silver highlights. Florrie was a Scandinavian blonde; the sort of girls that are made to eat as well as love.

"A slashing tart, Florrie," said Peter with regret.

A time factor put Florrie on an inaccessible Olympus; she was twenty-three, and goddesses of twenty-three can't be bothered with noodles of nineteen.

A group of bucolics greeted Florrie behind a secure defence of badinage. ". . . Hey! Florrie, where's the hurry—room for one here? Don't put it across a bloke, Florrie, have a heart.—All right, I'll be round tonight, leave the winder open. . . ."

Florrie's indolent hips disparaged encouragement from yokels; the other girl, disdainfully smiling, rejected any share in compliments that overlooked her. They passed, silhouetted in silver against the afternoon light. . . .

But a youth coming up the path arrested them, jested with them, and turned them about to go his way. Assurance marked the capture; it was done as a stylist, accenting method rather than material. One saw at a glance that he patronized a couple of girls worthy of his silk sports shirt, the cut of his flannel

trousers and the high shine on his brilliant black hair.

There was some boo-hooing from the bucolics as the three passed. From above, Jerry and Peter watched it with resentment too, though Jerry, as Peter's friend, and a just observer of relatives other than his own, paid it a deserved tribute.

"I will say Ronny's pretty quick off the mark with girls."

"That skite," said Peter.

Ronny was Peter's brother, so deference may be paid to an opinion from him untouched by vulgar prejudice. Besides, Ronny was twenty-two, and everybody knows what cows these elder brothers are. But they watched Ronny and the girls till they passed over the dunes that led to the sea beach, taking all delectable adventures with them. Side by side sat Jerry and Peter, twisting grass stems and vaguely rejecting the unknown spaces of an earth transfigured to an afternoon fantasy of light. Far down the coast its headlands dwindled into flat planes of blue that absorbed all local colour. A blue earth lost in a blue sea.

Below there a squabble had broken out among the bucolics. Detached cries came up to the sand dunes. ". . . Did he?—Own up,—said she was—I never. Put it to him. . . ."

Jerry craned over and sat back suddenly. A bull-headed youth with an inflamed red face had the centre of the path and he was offering aggression at a tall thin lout with a boy's-sized head, who stood some paces off, exuding funk and propitiation. The bull-headed one was shouting, "Own up. Put it to him again, Bungo."

"There's Herb Puncheon," said Jerry. "Blow him, he'll be after me for that damned drawing."

But conflict below had suddenly arrived at crisis. In a hubbub of outcries the bucolics surrounded Herb Puncheon and the tall lout, who was borne off among them like a wretch going to execution. Up the sand dunes they marched and down into a hollow beyond patched with scrub.

"There's a fight on," said Peter, all alive with interest.

They could not miss that and hurried over the ridge and down to the ti-tree scrub, where a forensic uproar was agitating the group packed round Herb Puncheon. A voice shouted, "Here's the very man," and faces were turned outward, all looking at Jerry.

Herb Puncheon had a mad china-blue eye which his red face made quite pallid by comparison, and he grabbed Jerry in a fury and lugged him into the witness box.

"Now put it to this bastard straight what he said to you about my sister Angel."

Aghast, Jerry understood in a flash what this convention proposed to investigate.

"Hold on, Herb——"

"Put it to him."

"But wait a shake——"

"Put it to him before I punch his bloody head off."

"Honest to God, Herb, he never said——"

Herb whirled in a frenzy and grabbed at another witness who was pushing a fat face like an indignant pudding into the inquiry.

"Here's Bungo to face you out. Put it to him, Bungo, the very words he told you."

Bulging with rectitude in his high office of informer, Bungo put those very words.

"Told me Fadgy Muntle told him he had your sister

Angel at the Red Cross dance back of the Mechanics.”

Herb instantly went insane and dashed himself into the posture of offense.

“Put ’em up,” he yelled.

Fadgy Muntle backed away with the face of a terrified turnip. An honest coward, he craved a poltroon’s name to escape a poltroon’s doom.

“So help me God I never said it. On a bloke’s word of honour—If a bloke sez I said it . . .”

Bungo quelled riot in his high office of informer.

“Here’s me repeats what’s told me. Here’s the man himself that told it.” He confronted Jerry. “With me here identically on the spot, own up the words you told me.”

“Look here, Bungo, I only said—I mean Fadgy only said—I mean—Look here, Herb——”

“Own up,” yelled Herb, enraged at this paltering with the rights of punching. Again Bungo quelled riot to confront Jerry.

“You mean to say he never said it?”

“No—that is—no—I——”

“Then I’ve got you. What did you say he said it for?”

A poser. Horrified at this nemesis for a little light scandal-mongering, Jerry sought a distracted medium between consternation on behalf of Fadgy and duplicity on behalf of himself.

“I only said that Fadgy only said that—I mean, there wasn’t anything really said. Look here, Herb, come out of this a minute and I’ll tell you the whole thing.”

Bungo was down instantly on this proposal to defraud an informer of a spectacle of punching.

“Here’s where it stands. You said to me that this

cow said to you that he had Herb's sister. I said to Herb what you said to me that this cow said to you. Now who's a liar, me or you?"

Again, dilemma.

"Because," added Bungo, pressing home its drastic finality, "if I'm a liar all I say is, 'put 'em up.'"

He put them up, one of them being a fist held under Jerry's nose.

A ghastly crisis. Jerry, incapable of fighting and terrified of blows, must either fight Bungo or deliver Fadgy to be murdered by Herb. A poltroon or a scoundrel—or both.

But crisis had overlooked a caption in friendship's holy name. Peter pushed Jerry aside and took his place confronting Bungo.

"Who are you talking fight to?" he demanded.

"You, if you're looking for it."

Smack! the impact of Peter's fist on Bungo's pudding face. In a flash they were bashing right and left at each other in an ecstatic scramble of barrackers, hooting on the combat. One hot round breathed a preliminary less of science than sadism. They drew apart, pulling off coats. A ring formed. Herb shook a fist at Fadgy to shout, "You and me for it after," and pushed in not to miss the sport. Jerry and Fadgy, professional cravens, were pushed to the outskirts of a now formalised riot, Jerry hopping with alarm on Peter's account.

"You stinkin' bastard," muttered Fadgy at him with great bitterness. Jerry lugged him apart in a fluster of duplicity.

"No, wait a minute; I'll fix this, Fadgy. Wait till I get Herb on his own. Listen, this is what I'll tell him . . ."

He talked rapidly, kicking up an agitated leg and craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the fight.

It was a good fight and stayed at that. Neither was beaten but both were well pounded and fifteen minutes of it found them winded and aware of a little belated rationality. Jerry snatched the moment to push in, placating everybody in hearty hurried tones.

"Pull up, blokes, what's the sense of fighting over nothing. I'll put this right in half a tick. Here a minute, Herb:—No, this is private, you blokes. . . ."

He lugged Herb over to where Fadgy waited, solemn with apprehension over a still suspended crisis. But Jerry's trenchant candour disposed of that on the spot.

"Here's the whole thing, Herb. What Fadgy said to me was that he had *Bungo's* sister, Edie. He never so much as mentioned your sister Angel. Naturally I couldn't tell Bungo that Fadgy said that about his sister, naturally——"

Herb gaped, confounded by this revelation. Then he awoke to an awful insult transferred to Bungo and raised a fist at Fadgy.

"Mean to say you had Bungo's sister Edie?" he demanded.

"Yes, I mean I only——"

Herb turned in a frenzy to summon Bungo to hear this, but Jerry grappled with. "Half a shake, Herb, you haven't got this right. He *never* had Bungo's sister."

Again confusion attended Herb's stare of a mad china dog.

"Fadgy was only skiting, see. He's owned that up to me. What I said to Bungo was that Fadgy said he had Annie Tricket out at the Red Cross dance, because

naturally I couldn't say he had Edie Potts, and I suppose Bungo got Angel's name mixed up with Annie's, because I remember saying Angel was the best looking girl in the district and that's the whole thing, and anyway, Herb, you ought to know me better than to think I'd say a word about your sister. That's what beats me, Herb, to think you'd think that."

Aberration of one detached from the functioning of a cortex was now the property of Herb's eye. A capacity to relate those sequences in words which demonstrate their fallibility as truth was denied him.

"Jerry, it's a thing I wouldn't have thought of you."

"Herb, you've practically accused me of it."

Fearfully wrought on, Herb thrust a hand at Jerry.

"Put it there," he said.

They gripped hands; integrity shone from either face. Fadgy shuffled, shamed by a revelation of noble manhood. Armed in spiritual worth, Herb turned on him austere.

"What's to be done about this cow?" he demanded.

"Fadgy's all right; let him go."

Herb shook his head. "Bungo's got to have a go at him for saying that about his sister," he pointed out.

"But don't you see, Herb, he's owned up that he never had Bungo's sister. Fair and square, you can't ask a man to do more than that. As for mentioning your sister, Fadgy would no more think of doing it than I would."

Wrought on by the prescription of spiritual worth, Herb thrust a hand at Fadgy.

"Put it there," he said.

Fadgy put it there with the whole-hearted fervour of a craven reprieved from a punched head. Jerry nodded him furtively to get out which he did, taking

his stand as an accredited pariah some distance from the group of bucolics. These, Herb and Jerry approached with the fine integrity of men who have transacted an affair of honour with honour to all concerned.

"It's all right, blokes. We've had it out and Herb owns he's satisfied," said Jerry.

"I'm satisfied," intoned Herb.

Bungo expressed instant dissatisfaction. He had a black eye, for one thing, besides a discredit to his office of informer.

"You mean to say that after what that cow said . . ."

"Fadgy's owned up it was a lie," said Jerry. "And anyway, Bungo, you're a mudhead for taking any notice of what a coot like Fadgy says; everybody knows he never had a girl in his life."

That put everything right, as conferring on all present a vast possession of girls not had by Fadgy. Bungo, himself a martyr to celibacy, was especially reinstated in dignity.

"Put it there," he said to Peter.

All partook of a fine flavour of fraternal emotion; heads had been punched and rages vindicated. Everybody felt that everybody else was a fine generous fellow, very brave, and scrupulous on the punctilio that sisters cannot be seduced. A day well spent.

A day about to end. The bucolics drifted off inland because of cows to milk, horses to feed, fruit to crate for tomorrow's market. But Herb Puncheon left Bungo Potts to haste back for a private word with Jerry.

"Reminds me, that redhot picture," he said.

"Why, I clean forgot it, Herb."

"Hard cheese. I got a meet on with Edie Potts to-night, and a good picture gets things going."

"All right, Herb, I'll knock it off and bring it over tomorrow."

"All right, you do, Jerry. . . ."

Sand hills stood out as golden bastions against the long shadows of the setting sun. Then that had dipped behind the Blue Mountains fifty miles away and the air turned soft as a caress.

Jerry and Peter dawdled at the lagoon, drawing peace from its untroubled surface, which picked up the colourless reflection of a pale evening sky. Exertions physical and forensic left them both a little used up.

"Too bad I let you in for this, Pete."

"You never let me in."

"I did. My curse is I talk too much. I ought to be kicked for letting out to Bungo what Fadgy said about Angel Puncheon."

"Did he say he had her?"

"Yes, silly cow; a slashing tart like Angel wouldn't look at a little squirt like Fadgy. I don't suppose he's ever spoken to her. By ginger, Pete, your hand's pretty badly puffed up."

"My own fault; I never can remember to close my fist tight when I hit."

"I hate to see a hurt hand."

"It's only sprained."

"It ought to be bandaged. Here,—let me——"

He fussed about Peter's hand, tying it up in his handkerchief.

Everywhere people were loitering home to dinner. Camping parties from the tented motor cars came back from the sea beaches, the men in shorts and singlets and the women fluttering drapes of brilliant colour. Over the sand dunes, too, came Ronny and his two girls, an exquisite with all eternity to idle in. . . .

All the same, if good looks don't warrant a proper conceit in the male, what does, even if good looks are standardised to a racial type? Ronny was placed by that aristocratic beauty of face one never sees among aristocrats, but which is reproduced everywhere among south Italian peasants, young Andalusians, and so on by a parent stock to Cornwell and the south of Ireland. Tregear as a locality name accounted for Ronny's olive skin, black eyes, insolent lips and straight fleshy nose.

A blood antagonism divided him from Peter, with his square-angled Northern face and short broad nose, bred from Atlantis. But racial labels stopped short at Jerry's beak of a nose, full lips and eager wedge of a face; the tormented hedonist imposed on an ascetic mask. Only Hell and Olympus evolve the conflict of emotional imagery inflicted on faces of that sort.

But only two average adolescents watched Ronny's pose of a freed libertine as he loitered along with the two girls, who were attracted to him and who resented him, as all too handsome fellows are resented by women for a claim to sex attraction which competes with theirs. . . .

Another encounter impended just then on the lagoon path. From its landward side Jerry's sister Nina was coming along at her usual strapping pace, flaunting her resolute young figure for inspection with disdain for those who inspected it. She was staring at Ronny as she came, and her stare distinguished him. . . .

Nina was an ultra brunette with light blue eyes, and when she was in a temper they were shot with an unholy glitter. She was in a temper now, and raked Ronny and his girls with unblinking scorn to within five paces of them, where the path converged upwards

to Key Heights. Up it Nina swerved, flicking Ronny out of existence with the tail of her skirt.

Ronny only laughed. Without dismissing the girls he merely left them to catch up with Nina and enrage her by pulling her back to keep pace with him. Jerry and Peter heard her snap at him, "God help your taste in wenches, you vulgar hound," and Ronny's pleased jeer, "You're my pick of the lot, nasty little Nina. . . ."

It had been observed by Jerry that Ronny was quick off the mark with girls. In Peter's opinion, Nina was hot stuff with boys.

Discreet fellows, they ignored a slight complexity in the home circle somewhat overstressed that afternoon, and turned to watch Florrie Candler and her friend dawdle off home too. Florrie's silvery laugh at Ronny had been very attractive; it dismissed a fool, but invited a world of lovers.

"Slashing tart, Florrie," said Peter in despair.

With linked arms, they also drifted off to isolation in that space labelled Home.

CHAPTER THREE

HOME. . . .

Gresham got out of his lounge chair to put down his book, fidget about the room, and pick up his book again.

He had done that three times, and now accounted his vague disturbance of mind to a blur of jazz from the front room.

That disconcerted him. Jazz from the front room was a signal for him to keep out of it. He rather liked its trolloping racket from a distance, with its tub thumped slogan that life might be gay and entertained. If anyone had gone through his portfolios, they would have found the beaches of Manly, Dee Why, and Narrabeen reconstructed as pleasure places, with every device of a decorated earth that may add grace to the simple resources of music, dancing, bathing, eating and promenading which alone can relieve the altogether overdone stress of life.

All that had been done long ago and long ago thrown aside. Utopian prattle. Conceptions of happiness that exist for man to reject. Why, then, allow a trivial buzz of jazz to intrude on the scepticism that resigned mankind to its sordid need for repression.

Gresham began to walk the edge of his carpet with precise steps, turning at the same point each time to retrace exactly the same steps back again. If he varied the clockwork placing of a step on the carpet's pattern a vague alarm disturbed the stultified emotion which

sought relief by a mechanical rhythm in the body. It had become a nightly exercise with him, that caged prowler whereby the virus of middle age returned upon an obscure trail of adolescence.

Now he was trying to fit his steps to the mechanical rhythm of jazz and it threw him out. He was performing a little dance all by himself and stopped the antic with a gesture of exasperation.

What to do? No more horrible question can oppress the mind. Nothing to do. No worse answer can be found for it.

With the false alertness of indecision Gresham went to the door and opened it. There he hung for a moment frankly embarrassed. Jazz came down the passage to put him in action once more. Strolling, because a moment's foolery can have no significance, he reached the big front room.

The rugs and chairs had been rolled onto the verandah and on the dark polished hardwood floor Nina and Ronny Tregear were performing a tango. They danced well, going through the postures of a graceful convention very well pleased with themselves. Baby Gresham was curled up on a couch and Jim Guthrie sat on its arm, bending over her. His softly pitched voice made it necessary to lower his face to hers, else would the gramophone have drowned it.

Gresham's nod encouraged groupings not to disturb themselves on his account while he went to a side table for a whisky, which he sipped, watching Nina and Ronny. A pair of young Iberians with their tinted skins and black hair and the aplomb of movement in their restless limbs. Nina's light eyes were the only concession she made to the family's fairness.

The music stopped and Nina clicked off the machine, saying,

"Why all the fuss about a profession for Ronny. Obviously he's a born gigolo."

"Looking for a professional dancing partner, are you," retorted Ronny.

"I might think of you for the job."

"No go. I don't mind putting myself up for sale if an old woman of eighty will settle an income of five thousand on me, but flappers are barred."

Jim looked gravely astonished. "I've heard of that being done," he said. "It puzzles a man to think what those chaps are made of."

"Stick a pin in Ronny and find out," said Nina.

"Next insult you get your bottom smacked."

"Insult! I *would* like to know exactly where you could be insulted, Ronny darling."

Ronny smacked her hard. She kicked him. He grabbed her ankle. . . . The rest of it was a vulgar fight which carried them with a rush out to the verandah lounges where it grappled with hissings of execration.

"Nina's very exhausting to watch," said Gresham.

"She's very strong," said Jim. "Surprising. I have to go all out to crank up that old trawler of mine, but Nina can turn it."

"I suppose you couldn't give her a job at the garage, Jim," said Baby Gresham.

"Well, a lot of garages are putting girls on at the bowsers——"

"How are you getting along with the business, Jim?" asked Gresham, to relieve Jim's gravity of a flippancy.

"Not so bad, but I haven't much of a head for business——"

Nina came back hitching her frock into place and put on another record. "Your turn," she said to Jim, and pulled him up by the hands. It was a slow fox trot and they paraded it while Ronny put his hair straight in a wall mirror and examined a slight abrasion on his cheek. He took Jim's place by Baby Gresham to say, "You ought to get a sparring partner for Nina, Baby. Guests aren't safe with her."

"None of us are," complained Baby.

Baby! Gresham twiddled his glass and glanced at his wife, suddenly aware of that absurd name of hers. Yet in spite of being forty she did carry it off well, with her slight figure and the neat aquiline finish of her face. No tissues to sag there, but with a little more thinning it would become hectic. Stark contours of the feminine frightened her; she brushed her soft chestnut hair low on her forehead and down over her ears, and kept her eyelids lowered till she wished to invite attention to her eyes, which she then opened wide with a stare of wilful innocence. It was effective, with her trick of hitching up her shoulders and projecting her face in a shortsighted way which made a confidence on the spot with her soft sincere voice.

One finely tapered leg was hitched up on the couch and she was slipping its jade green shoe off and on with a caressing finger as she turned her face up to Ronny. . . .

Gresham put down his glass and signalled a casual impulse by taking his wife's hand.

"Come on; I haven't had a dance since Lord knows when:—"

"But, Walter!"

Her tone was slightly scandalized, reproving a levity, but he hauled her up and with some fumbling at

the steps went off with her. For a moment both were awkward, clutched in a public embrace till Gresham picked up the trick of a facile rhythm.

The vague stare that reproved a bizarre antic left Baby Gresham's face; perhaps a more bizarre emotion replaced it. Gresham responded to the compliment of her body pressed against his; wives are not sufficiently aware that husbands appreciate that sort of thing. . . .

"Oh, indeed! A very pretty sight."

Nina had stopped dancing and was observing her parents with scorn. She plumped onto the lounge and squared her shoulders and ejected comment.

"The proprieties, indeed; papa and mama! Papa's going gay; if ma doesn't look out she'll get herself talked about. A scandal in the home. Your knees are damned stiff, dad. And don't tread on ma's toes; you know she's got a corn. . . ."

Ronny hooted with laughter. "Nina's narked; she's jealous of mama."

"Shut up, Gigolo."

Jim opened his eyes wide, astonished at Nina's outburst. Gresham smiled tolerantly at the home's admitted nuisance.

"Any more of your cheek and I'll dance with you," he said.

But he was glad when the gramophone stopped. Impossible to posture gracefully to a poisonous insinuation that he intended to seduce his wife. If that was the enterprise behind a casual impulse it languished suddenly. He restored Baby to the couch beside Jim and poured himself a whisky. Nina dashed at the gramophone and set it going. In a businesslike way she grabbed her mother and threw her across Jim. "Dance with that," she said. Baby uttered a sharp sound of

anguish and rubbed her arm. Jim helped her to rise and stood embarrassed, waiting for orders. Nina shoved them off and they went off to escape her. Then she motioned truculently at Gresham.

"If you *will* dance," she said.

"No, I'm hanged if I will, Nina——"

"Rot!"

She tugged him out. To relieve an absurd struggle, Gresham came. Nina clutched him and off they went; she was very strong, and Gresham was forced to take charge of her in self-defence.

It was worse than dancing with his wife. Parental shames did not know what to do, taken charge of by Nina's resolute young body. He tried to stand her off but she would have none of it; her expression was that of a purist putting an indecorum strictly in order. Ronny found it very funny. . . .

A great relief to Gresham when the music stopped. Besides feeling a fool, he detested Nina just then, without allowing his mask of urbanity to know why.

"There, I've had enough of renewing your youth, Nina, go and be a nuisance to Ronny now."

He dawdled till another record was put on and escaped back to his room. "*That* for a theory of releases in the home," he snarled.

Or releases out of it. In the swift impasse of reverie he picked up that tall girl's hand bag on the boat, captured her, took her to dinner, danced with her and——

Rot! prearranged love affairs intend to defeat themselves. And the last thing he wanted was a love affair; a break in the monotony of merely existing, that was all he asked for. Which meant a love affair. Or at least an affair. . . .

He was back at that treadmill of a carpet, pacing out

its pattern. Aware of that he stamped to a liquor cabinet and got out whisky and siphon. Another habit begotten of boredom, that nightly nipping. But it helped. He sipped, staring at the designs for the Century Theatre on his table. "Rotten," he thought, "and the joke is I thought them pretty good today. But my mind's petrified in staleness."

He put the designs away and began sorting his papers and tidying up his table. That brought him another spasm of revolt, which visualized in a flash the fatuous activities of earth forever imposing an exercise of order on a process incessantly falling into decay. Anarchy is the only retort on a system designed to go wrong. 'You cannot alter, you can only smash.'

But he put everything in order and went to his bedroom, which was next to his studio. The windows of both rooms faced the garden and their doors opened on a little Roman courtyard that had once given him great pleasure to reconstruct, though he had modernized the central pool with a fountain. All the bedroom doors of the house opened here, which had seemed a better idea than it was, because if Gresham wished to visit his wife's room he had to sneak past Nina's bedroom, and that sort of thing puts a blight on the proposal to pretend that the awful shames of marriage don't exist.

Now as he turned on the light he heard the voices of Jim and Ronny departing, and his wife came to the courtyard and paused at his door to yawn, and turn up her georgette sleeve to examine her arm.

"Nina is becoming unbearable," she said pettishly. "Just look at my arm; I bruise so easily, too."

"Yes, that was an annoying exhibition of hers tonight; made me feel a damned fool. The fact is, she's——"

He vacillated, not quite knowing what Nina was. Psychological labels do not apply to the home circle. He put that off to make a general grievance of it.

"There's a kink somewhere between us and those kids of ours. Rationalising this job of parent doesn't work out. I saw Wally yesterday. He was drunk and dirty and he borrowed three quid off me."

"Poor Wally. I wish he would live at home."

"I don't. As it was he filled the house with those brawling friends of his. I can't stand that racket at my age; they shout so infernally in argument. He's loafing, of course; my fault for giving him that allowance. But what else can I do while—And there's young Jerry—By the way, where *does* that boy live. I've seen him three times at meals this week."

"Oh, he knows all sorts of awful people in the district and appears to live at their houses."

"He must have some social graces that he keeps very dark here. I don't know what excuse he's got for being so infernally furtive to me. Wally's all boozy affection and Jerry's all secret resentment, and I'm hanged if I can really get in touch with either of them."

"But you don't want to, Walter."

"Eh! what!—"

Baby only smiled; she had a disconcerting trick of bringing out remarks like that and leaving them there. Gresham was conscientiously annoyed by that one.

"Hang it, you can't say I'm the average repressive parent. I've always given those kids freedom to develop on their own lines. Even Nina——"

He got his mask of urbanity back in a hurry there because Nina had come into the courtyard. Seeing those two talking together she stopped to regard them with suspicion.

"Pinching little cat," said her mother, still meditatively rubbing her arm. Gresham said suavely,

"Your pose of the freed young modern is a bit excessive, Nina. Parents may be pests, but knocking them about is a prerogative of the lower orders. The correct attitude is to dismiss them as incompetents who haven't succeeded in growing up.—"

Nina's black eyebrows contracted over the glitter of her cat's eyes and she rejected him with a hitch of one shoulder and turned abruptly in at her bedroom door, which she banged behind her. But Gresham had seen the unstable quiver of her lips, and fell into a temper to escape an attack of compunction.

"Good lord, why the devil can't Nina grow up. She goes on like a young termagant and then wants to be petted like a spoiled child. Oh damn!—"

He made a peevish gesture and resigned these sports of annoyance to their prime cause.

"Look here, Baby, the whole trouble is we've got into an isolated rut in this place. At least, I have. You manage to screw a certain amount of diversion out of going about, but I come home every night to be bored to death in that damned room of mine. It's this blasted house, which is too far from town to invite people to for the evening, and I'm hanged if I can stand going back there at night after being there all day. Couldn't you make up a party here now and then from the people in the district."

Baby Gresham accepted this proposal with bland malice.

"A party here? And who has always insisted on not having parties here?"

"I know, I know:—That was all very well when I wanted quiet evenings after a hard day's work, but now

these quiet evenings have just the opposite effect to being quiet. They leave me irritated. I don't want much; only something to break the cursed monotony of evenings. Look at it yourself; unless you go to a show in town, or to the Australia or the Ambassadors, you've got to fall back here on lads like Jim Guthrie for company."

"Jim's a very nice boy."

"Oh, he's all right. I'm not looking for intellectuality; the less of those the better. All I want is to deflect boredom; at my age I can't expect entertainment."

"At your age, Walter, that is just what men do expect."

"Oh, don't throw up the usual rot about middle age going gay. I'm not that sort of fool. Look here, you used to complain that I didn't go about to manufactured amusements with you; what objections are there to my doing so now?"

"Oh, none, if you really want to."

That acquiescence was calm with the rejection of a childish proposal. She moved to the door, adding as a return to serious matters, "I wish you would think about getting another car, Walter. You use the Sunbeam and Nina clears off in the small car and if I want to go anywhere I have to ring up a taxi——"

"Oh, all right, all right, I'll see about it."

Alone in his room he wrenched off his clothes and snatched on his pyjamas and lit a cigarette. With no other minor activity to explode annoyance on he stood and scowled at his face in the mirror, affirming an injustice by a facial contortion. A genuine injustice, too. That appeal for a little entertainment in the home circle had been jerked out of him without his own consent, and now he found it the matured statement

of a prime grievance against life. Rejected as a triviality. And Baby went out at least three nights a week. . . .

Her need for diversion. Generous fellow, he had always conceded to that need, protecting thereby his own need for inertia. Now that she coolly dismissed his claim to a little diversion, he wished suddenly to inquire into the procedure by which she was diverted. Perhaps he wished for a precedent to justify a like procedure on his own account. If he took her word for it all she required was a suitable dancing partner. . . .

He glanced across the courtyard and saw that her window was still alight. That bar of light barred her bedroom to him because it shone across the open door of Nina's room. Convinced of a sleepless interlude, he went back to the studio for the whisky bottle and a book. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

ON MONDAY morning young Jerry came forth from the Gresham home and walked off briskly along the Key Heights road, making for the village of Key Heights, where he would take the bus into Pymble and so to the college where he still practised scholar. He carried his lunch in a leather bag, and with it those text books necessary to his profession.

All this but covered a monstrous imposition on the Gresham home. He caught no bus at Key Heights; he went to no college at Pymble. He carried his lunch in the bag, certainly, but its other contents were pens, india ink, pencils and the MS. of a novel.

A laborious structure of duplicity is exposed here. It had been going on for a year and was still undetected. A year ago Jerry had decided to delete school from the ego's struggle to get rid of mob ritualism. In other words he detested the nuisance of going daily to a large barrack and intoning drivel from text books with a horde of his species. He had done his best to defend the secret needs of his being by stupidity. He could not—which meant he would not—learn mechanical systems of logic. That put mathematics on the rubbish heap. He could not—would not—learn foreign languages. That left only the English language to learn about, a subject that cannot be taught.

He disliked,—which meant that he feared, the massed arrogance of scholars. He detested school masters, who detested him, as a sport on their job of re-

ducing the species to a neutralised mass. In short, he rejected school by forcing it to reject him.

His operations were forgery and a misuse of the postal service. By typing a note under his father's forged signature it was a simple matter to withdraw himself from that academy. As he carried the quarterly cheque to school himself, he had merely to stow it away in his secret cupboard. But the quarterly report gave him a lot of trouble. . . .

He preserved the last one by taking it from his father's papers. With the date altered it had to keep on accounting for a phantom intercourse with text books. At the end of each term he posted it himself, watched for its arrival, re-stole it, and stowed it away for re-posting. The nuisance was that much service was giving it a used up air. Repeated alterations of the date made a disgrace of that section and once his father had crumpled it up into the waste paper basket, and forced him to iron it flat without really getting the creases out of it.

For the rest, a divine relief of mind during those hours when he must hide from human beings. He hid just as far as it was necessary to keep up the illusion of isolation; he hid that he might maintain a grievance of pariahdom in the home, though he was not aware of that. Loitering the day away on ocean headlands or inland among orchards or down the gullies of yet untouched bush country, he was the lonely denizen of desert islands; the last survivor left on earth. Beaches and high roads were barred to him because the home circle went about such places.

But Nina was the only member of it who really contributed to a theory of pariahdom in the home, and he was able to extract a good deal of honest resentment

from her. She either disregarded his existence or was violently rude about it, commenting on it as a fungus adhesion to the stinks of a bucolic community, which he did sometimes bring into the home attached to his boots. Just then Nina suffered an excessive fastidiousness over an offense to the senses, and made an almighty fuss over dirt on the person or an aroma of cowdung from the boots. She was constantly ordering Jerry from the table to disenfect himself of these trifles.

Today Jerry kept up a brisk walk for half a mile along the Key Heights road and turned down a shaded by-way, where duplicity was discarded for the art of sauntering. He had a day to put in and knew how to do it. Sauntering readjusts inspection to the minutiae of earth; insects are restored to their function of being looked at by human beings. Knowing this, they are inveterate posturers, and do all sorts of insane things, so that old gentlemen will remain madly watching them all their lives. A tainted practice of fiction on both sides, whereby the insects invent antics so that the old gentlemen may invent explanations of them. Ant lions were the only public performers that Jerry was able to test by the inventive faculties of old gentlemen; he proved that if you pushed an ant into one of their traps it could not get out, but an idiotic compunction for ants made him hook the experiment out before the ant lion got it, if the ant lion really knew how to, which is to be doubted.

Drifting and drivelling, Jerry arrived at a hollow of tall blue gums and there camped. He had a seat fixed here in the fork of a tree, and a place for his ink and a rest for his sketch book. Arranging these matters, he

got rid of that sketch for Herb Puncheon as quickly as possible.

No doubt Jerry enjoyed his prestige among bucolics by the practice of a little harmless pornography, but he disliked the job too. Those crudities aroused an undefined fear for the freed image of sex which was the muddled aspiration of his being. And the puritan has always known how to destroy that; pornography is his bludgeon to murder a happy and licentious earth. By the smutty story and the indecent photograph he achieves his secret ritual, and death to all who would explode its repressed lust in art. Only the brutal sadism of war is allowed to do that. . . .

A job done in the service of puritanism, Jerry stowed the drawing in his pocket and got out his novel in a fine bustle of something important to be done. Words were always going to be wonderful things; life was about to become real; concreted by an image of itself.

In effect, the effort to compact life into words clouded his mind with blank spaces. He concentrated so tremendously on an exercise of thinking that thought was paralyzed; an awful resistance got to work on the moment he sat down to write. Yet write he did, and that proved him the creature of a satanic possession.

Today even satanism refused to function. He had got his hero as usual ejected from the home by a ruthless parent and now he had to eject his heroine so that she could run off with the hero to the perfect love episode. Parents were the villains of all Jerry's novels and he had to sweat ingenuity a good deal to present their prime villainy of frustrating perfect love episodes in the young. Invention's other problem was to find an inspired stage setting for this dramatic crescendo of all novels. It had to be small, secure, isolated. Caves

had been tried, lonely huts, haystacks, lofts, cellars. Perhaps his best dramatization was in a packing case on a stormy night.

But when all has been said that can be said about possessing a girl in a confined space, which isn't much, when you come to squeeze it out into a misuse of synonyms, where are you, squirming among the spirals and scribbles and girls' faces of a frustrated literary aspiration.

Repeated exercises of concentration almost sent Jerry to sleep. He gave it up and took to the pencil, which at once lightened his mind, even if it gave his faculties a lot of trouble. These were now trying to put down on paper a memory portrait of young Mazie Potts, sister to Bungo Potts, and the only approachable girl that Jerry could come at just then. The fact that she had a round podge of a face and a contemptuous underlip and a hard cold policeman's eye gave his image of her some duplicities to contend with, but when he thought he had got it something like her, (which he hadn't,) it seemed to become exactly like her, and that gave him a tremendous thrill.

The next thing was to draw himself kissing her, and that made duplicity sweat, for he not only drew himself as handsome as possible but had to settle that infernal problem of the kiss on paper, which requires that you sacrifice a nose on one face and a chin on the other. Which to sacrifice? If you give the girl the nose she looks silly without the chin, and if you cut off her nose she looks awful, while if you give both faces noses and chins you can't get the lips to meet without projecting them in a very objectionable manner.

In the end he fell to his usual desperate device of giving the girl both nose and chin and drawing his

own face with a convex twist in it that tucked the nose and chin on the other side of the girl's face but brought the lips to a correct adjustment. . . .

Still, a day diverted.

By three o'clock he had come out on the highlands a couple of miles beyond Key Heights road and now dawdled along to the Puncheon homestead, tucked away between fields of flowering fruit trees.

Here was a scented earth, except when bone dust manuring was in action. Spring frosted the trees with blossom and ordered perspectives carried the eye to every horizon and ploughed lines of chocolate coloured earth drew it back. A quiet glitter edged everything.

Jerry came up the wheel rutted entrance to the Puncheon house and sidled cautiously past it, because Pa Puncheon was asleep on the verandah, and Pa was a notable monologist, and scorned no audience. A plough turned the rise of a field and bore down it with a musical jink of trace chains, the big draught horse drawing an easy furrow through that rich soil, which cut like a cheese.

Jerry climbed the fence as Herb Puncheon turned the plough over with a rude word of command to the horse.

"Brought you that, Herb."

"Good on you, Jerry."

Herb examined the drawing, ratified it, and chuckled fatuously.

"That's good," he said. "That's a bit of all right. That's the fair dinkum goods anyday."

"Oh, that's nothing."

"Well, I couldn't do it. That's straight. Not if you paid me I couldn't."

All praise is good, even in the service of puritanism.

If you dream of a freed and happy earth, that understands its disgraces too.

"See you've started spring ploughing, Herb."

"Yes. Ed's over the seven acre with the double plough. Dan's gone to Hornsby for crates."

"Want any manure?"

"We do, yes. Go for it? Right. You'll find the chestnut in the stable."

"Any message for Edie Potts?"

Herb's china blue eye registered sudden rage. "You can tell her she's a cock-eyed bitch, for all I care. She's had three dances and a box of chocolates out of me and what have I had back? Got me bloody face shoved in for tryin' to get a fair return on me money. You can tell her to go and get jigged."

"No, Herb, I wouldn't tell her that. Take my tip and kid her a bit. What about me saying I saw you out with Florrie Candler last week."

Herb scowled, scratched his neck, identified a subtle measure and guffawed.

"You've hit it, Jerry. Tell her I'm out after Florrie for all I'm worth."

"No fear, Herb, I'll say Florrie's out after you."

Again Herb guffawed at a subtlety that put up his price as a seducer and went off chuckling, "You're a nut, Jerry, you got 'em all beat."

These, in short, were those social graces for which Jerry was much esteemed among bucolics, and he practised them with the self-esteem of any other good liar.

In Herb's little harness smelling bedroom off the stable he put off his coat and trousers and pulled on an old pair of Herb's blue jean overalls. With the sketch of Mazie Potts transferred to their pocket he went out to harness up the chestnut.

He liked the strenuous masculinity of this job, with its 'Gedup' and 'Stand over' commands to an immense horse, and the various activities that saw him jolting forth, as charioteers once drove in the circus, standing upright in the spring cart. It took some doing, and he hoped those who saw it commended a fine performance.

By quiet roads he drove to Potts's dairy farm. Here were no sun flecked graces of a blossoming earth. Cows disgrace all surfaces, horizontal or vertical. Fences stagger, grow tufts of cow hair, and fall down, and the earth is a trolloped mush in wet weather and a caked abomination when dry.

Old Potts was in the yard and that was a disaster, because Old Potts was a horny old man with an opaque eye, sadistic impulses and less brains than a cow. At least, he sometimes beat his daughters with a length of trace for what he called 'gadding,' and no one ever heard of a cow doing that yet. Thus one pretended that he had no daughters when those daughters were in the presence of Old Potts.

For fully five minutes Old Potts now stared at Jerry and his cart before identifying them both with certain proposals in that yard.

"Manoor?" then said Old Potts suspiciously.

"Manoor," confessed Jerry, not in imitation of Old Potts but in automatic subjection to him.

"Got your own shovel?"

"Yes."

Old Potts had to think hard about that for another five minutes while screwing up one eye to scratch that side of his head before changing over to screw up and scratch the other. He then jerked his head violently at the milking sheds and a business transaction was ratified.

Jerry backed the dray in against a vast heap of solidified cowdung and began slicing a surface on it to get at its soft substratum, which sent forth an acrid odour that nipped the back of the nostrils. Old Potts stood close in and narrowly watched this business, as if he suspected a quest for treasure trove. Jerry hated shovelling under any terms, but one must practise strenuous masculinity for its rewards, and those Old Potts was frustrating. It was now clear that he suspected Jerry of intending to fill up the cart and pocket some manure on his own account. And Edie Potts had come to the back door and signalled something over which Jerry dared not signal back for enlightenment.

With the cart loaded up he had to go, else be detected mad for wilfully spending time in the company of Old Potts. Old Potts was now anchored over the cowdung; he found its stinks too good to leave.

But Edie was practised in the conspiracies of having a pa like Old Potts. As Jerry jolted past the kitchen she appeared at the door to say, "Mazie up the stable."

So that was all right. Jerry drove round the Potts house to a cowdunged lane, where he left the cart and went with precaution to where a paling fence abutted on the Potts stable, with just enough room for Mazie Potts to squeeze in between the stable and the fence, where Jerry found her caged, like a rare but dangerous specimen of girl. Her round bobbed head was very alluring but her cold policeman's eye made a notorious offender of Jerry on the spot. Mazie, in fact, was one of those girls who enhance their own worth at the expense of yours. Fearfully repelled and attracted, and red to the ears, Jerry greeted her with assumed surprise.

"Hallo, Maze, bit of luck finding you here."

"Didn't Ede tell you I was here?"

"Yes,—I mean, your old man was in the yard——"

"As if I'd come here without telling Ede I was here. I only come here for a minute, too."

"Oh, don't go; your old man can't get round here."

"Pooh,—him!"

That disposed of Jerry as an attraction to keep Mazie wedged in between a stable and a fence. Still, she hitched her rump against the stable and her toes on the fence and lolled her chin on the palings, which was so far a social pose to the good. With nothing to loll on, Jerry was badly exposed out there, and fumbled for the conventions of easy speech.

"Been having any fun, Maze?"

"Had a party down Stimson's Thursday night bonzer fun dancing."

"Was it?"

"Mick Stimson's a bonzer dancer."

"Is he?"

"I like Mick Stimson."

No scalpel work about Mazie's methods; crude action with a carving knife. Jerry couldn't bear it.

"Oh, blast it, Maze, don't go with a cow like Mick Stimson."

"Who,—me? I'm not going with anybody."

"What about me?"

"You!"

"Don't be a nark, Maze, you know I'm ratty about you. Fair and square I am. I am, really——"

Among bucolics Jerry submitted to their idiom without knowing that he did so. Mazie bit off a sizable piece of fence and chewed it at leisure. Her style rejected any assumption that she had wedged herself in behind a fence to hear of torments extorted by her

wondrous being. Forced to make some claim to worth in its service, Jerry produced his sketch.

"Just a bit of a thing I knocked off for you," he apologised.

Mazie spat out her bit of fence to take the tribute, but that made no concession to its subject matter.

"I suppose that's meant for me," she said.

"It's not good enough for you."

That was understood. At the same time Mazie whipped the sketch into her stocking, and that could be taken for a gracious unbending. Jerry became urgent.

"Listen, Maze, what about you and Elsie Stimson coming for a walk with me and Pete Tregear next Sunday. We'll meet you at Minter's corner at half past three."

Mazie put her price up at once by sampling another piece of fence and chewing it disdainfully. "I might," she said, and spat out the sample to add briskly, "Time I was gettin' back."

"Oh, don't go. Here,—just a minute,—listen—"

"What?"

"Put your face over so I can tell you."

Mazie conceded so far to a convention as to project her face at an angle which allowed Jerry to kiss it by hooking himself up on the fence. He wished to go on kissing it, but Mazie couldn't let her face go as cheaply as that, and retracted it to say, "So long," while detaching her toes and her rump and vanishing behind the fence.

"Sunday, don't forget," said Jerry to the fence.

"I might," said the fence.

Still, he went off elated. A kiss is fair spoil to self esteem, and he worked up a lot of lyricism over Mazie's absence that he never felt in her presence. In her

presence he was aware of a terrible incompetence that could only be disposed of by her absence. She was a vast disturbance on his prime need to dramatize the fantasy of love, but in herself she was no more disturbing than one of her pa's cows, though of course Jerry did not discover that.

He deposited his load of manure in the Puncheon yard and allowed Pa Puncheon to capture him, as he thereby escaped going for another load of manure. Pa Puncheon was now tremendously awake and bulging with conversation. An immense and regal man, with a fatly whiskered face and a prominent Guelph eye, and a rich round rolling voice with gravy in its undertones, he came trundling round the house and at once got up a burst of conversation about unharnessing horses.

"Trace chains before the surcingle, my boy; detach your vehicle before your horse. Many a disaster is averted by remembering that simple rule. I recall an instance, recorded by my father. A lady of rank had chanced to visit him, driving a spanking pair; tandem:—Unbuckle your hains underneath, my boy, never on top. So:—The groom, it seems, had forgotten to unhook the leader's off trace. The horse, a mettlesome creature, reared and plunged; in a trice, the lady had been under its hooves. My father, a man of instant action, swung her aside with one hand while whipping the trace loose with the other, arresting the shafter with an iron grip. So, water your horse, my boy. The lady, as a souvenir of the event, sent him her portrait, aptly framed in a silver trace chain. . . ."

Pa Puncheon looked rather like the late King Edward might have looked after spending the night in a small pub where somebody had stolen his clothes, and he had been forced to borrow an outsize in trousers

and an old pair of slippers from the landlord. In this easy dishabille he still shone forth a regal presence, and so got himself back to his old cane lounge on the verandah with Jerry respectfully in attendance well under Pa Puncheon's eye. As a practised narrator, Pa required to see his art reflected in the human face.

“. . . and, while on the subject of horses, an instance occurs to me of my father's profound powers as an observer. The occasion was that of the public unveiling of that celebrated statue to the Duke of Wellington. A superb work; all London was there to see the ceremony performed. Bands played, troops paraded, Royalty itself looked on. As the covering was removed a vast shout went up, the people cheered, connoisseurs appraised a masterpiece, the sculptor was knighted on the spot. But my father—” here a rolling richness in Pa's grave tones marked crescendo approaching—“my father, with one glance, recorded a fatal omission. ‘By Gad, sir, (crescendo) he's forgotten the bellyband.’ And by Gad, sir, (crescendo fortissimo) so he had!”

And just there, where you were suspended breathless on a dramatic apex, Pa Puncheon hit you in the belly with its anticlimax, “The sculptor went straight home and shot himself,” and that knocked you out flat, the servile subject of Pa Puncheon's art.

In these seances, Jerry was as practised a sycophant as Pa Puncheon was a liar. Pa recorded personal reminiscences from the ana of a forgotten species of literature, and everything that happened in those books happened to Pa Puncheon's father. You could easily see why Pa had never done a stroke of work in his life; a parent of awful potency had usurped the functioning of his ego. As Pa Puncheon had failed to murder

his father, his father murdered him. That just suited Pa. He had drifted from England to Australia forty years ago and married the daughter of a publican, which saved him just in time from paying the publican a gigantic bill for booze. The publican had then kept him till he acquired enough grown up sons to take over the job. On them he had conferred his murder motive intact, for they greatly revered him, being locality Australians by the mother's side, with voices to match. That magnificent organ of Pa Puncheon's ana played its diapason without effect on the nasal monotony of their voices, which were pitched in one tone and one key, unless they shouted at each other, which they always did in argument.

Now Herb and Ed were loafing home with the fall of evening, their horses jingling behind them. They walked with that loose jointed give at the knees which all peasants acquire who walk ploughed fields, denizens of the soil, which means everything and nothing to them. Jerry went to join them in the yard over the evening toilet of men and horses. There was a subtle charm to him in the routine which closed down a day's work in the open, which he did not know was a release from the evils of the spirit, and helped with gusto to feed and bed down the horses, and strip to a singlet with Herb at the washing tub. Ed had hurried into the house and came out now with a bottle of iodine, with which he carefully painted a small scratch on his brawny forearm.

"Got that on a bit o' barbed wire," he told Jerry darkly. "Aint a more dangerous thing 'n barbed wire. Give a man blood poisonin', barbed wire. Take case o' Bill Jagoie scratched himself on a bit a galvanised iron. Arm on him like a bloody bolster. 'Take it to the

doctor this minute,' I ses. 'Not me, bit of a scratch like that,' he ses. 'Mark me,' I ses, 'that bit of a scratch'll put you in the coffin.' Was I right? Dead as mutton in three days. . . ."

Ed had an awful repertoire of instances marking the doom of those who failed to profit by his death warnings. He was a great bull-necked fellow with the muscles of a draught horse, and he lived to eat and sleep and take patent medicines. These were the substituted image of his prime funk of women, which he transferred to the terror of death. He would slink off with craven alarms at the sight of a girl and was for ever making a fuss over germs, and dashing for disinfectants and throat gargles and things to chew.

Then Dan Puncheon arrived with the Ford car piled with crates and straightway bellowed at Ed, "What the flamin' hell d'yer mean by chuckin' wet bags on my gun barrel?"

"Wad' yer mean wet bags a flamin' gun barrel?"

"Found 'smornin' the harness room a flamin' wet bag chucked on it. Ruined it. Flamin' barrel's rusted. Punch the blasted head off a man ruins my gun barrel. . . ."

They yelled murderously at each other. All the Puncheons had hair trigger tempers but Dan really specialised in going bung like a mad firework. Quality of offense had nothing to do with quantity of frenzy in him; he made just as much uproar over a difference of opinion on patent manures as a sacrilege committed on his gun, which he revered more than Pa Puncheon. You could hear his yells across a ten acre paddock.

Jerry enjoyed those Puncheon uproars, which threatened murder and were forgotten at anything that de-

flected attention from bellowing. There was that about the Puncheons; you could bemuse their powers of concentration at a moment's notice.

Washed and refreshed, Jerry loitered with Herb on the verandah, waiting for dinner. No formality invited Jerry to it; he was liked in that house, because it was one of those houses that did not know that a differentiation of the species existed. A safe place:—almost safe——

Angel Puncheon came to the door of her bedroom, abstractedly polishing her fingernails, a tall cool girl with vacant eyes. She gave Jerry a faint smile and forgot him. If she had remembered him he would hardly have been better off, for nothing got within a mile of those lovely vacuous eyes, which inverted every Puncheon characteristic, and did not know that there was anything in the universe to make a fuss about.

“Did Ede Potts say she was making up a party for the dance at Hornsby?” she asked Herb presently.

“She did. And she can bloomin' well make it up off her own hook.”

“Is Bill Purfoy going?”

“I dunno. All I do know is I ain't going. I had enough of Ede Bloomin' Potts.”

Angel was not interested in Herb's satiation point of interest in Edie Potts. But then, she was not much interested in anything. Not boredom, but a failure somewhere to dramatise the need for entertainment.

Jerry fidgeted while she was there, embarrassed, because he could never think of anything to say to her. Perhaps there was nothing to say. She was twenty-four, anyway, which put her in the mountains of the moon. It was a relief when she dawdled back to her room.

Dinner at Puncheon's was a thumping meal, hot from the oven no matter how hot the day. Joints of the largest, great mounds of vegetables, distending puddings, tea——

A proper diet for bucolics in any climate, but death to an enfeebled stomach in a hot one. Mrs. Puncheon served it, a worthy dumpy little woman who never stopped cooking, and who came and whispered in your ear to have more pudding. Jerry hated food at home, where it was fastidiously cooked, but he enjoyed those guzzlings at the Puncheon table.

A Puncheon evening epilogued its day. Pa Puncheon held court, a listener being present. Herb and Ed and Dan suffered the Australian inhibition against comfort to the backside and sat on the steps, or squatted on their heels, sometimes listening to Pa and sometimes having rows among themselves, which had no effect on Pa richly rolling on over the raucous conflict of his sons. Ed went to bed early, and could be seen through his window doing his nightly disinfectings and garglings. At half past ten Herb got strangulated fits of yawning and said, "What about bedo. Comin', Jerry?"

Jerry came; he liked sleeping in Herb's little harness-smelling bedroom off the stable, where there was room for two in Herb's three-quarter bed, and where a litter of saddles and horse rugs and guns rid one of the emasculations of a too clean home. Herb's dog slept there too, and a horse in the next compartment made comfortable champing noises in the night.

Herb always lit his pipe on getting into bed, with the air of a man settling down for a night's intimate talk, but his gruntulous monologue never saw his pipe out, for he had the bucolic gift of taking sleep like a drug. His bedtime meditations revolved on a fixed theme;

whether girls were, or were not, worth having. A bloke didn't want the cows but a bloke had to have them. He wished to dispose of this dilemma by the forensic assurance that the expense of having them wasn't worth it, but sleep always put him out of action before he settled it.

Jerry confirmed misanthropy in Herb about girls, knowing them to be the only things in life worth having. Nights on the Puncheon homestead brought him a charmed wakefulness. It was moonlight now, and he looked out on vistas of silver fruit blossoms, and the motionless listening poise of trees in a still night.

They brought him a thrill of happiness, interpreting an unuttered message, 'come out, come out, the earth is alive for man is dead——'

But women, one knew, lay awake and waited for lovers.

CHAPTER FIVE

AS JERRY put in next day at the Puncheon homestead he did not arrive home till dinner was being served, and came to table with the soup. He also brought with him a slight glaze of the various jobs he had assisted at that day, and that was a mistake, Nina being present.

"Go and wash that filth off at once, you dirty wretch," she exclaimed, which brought other inspection to bear on him.

"Really, Jerry, you haven't been to school in that collar," protested his mother.

"He hasn't been to school at all," scoffed Nina.

"I have."

"You've been away somewhere for two days."

"I stayed at Puncheons."

"And I suppose Puncheons cut your lunch for you."

"I—I didn't want any——"

Jerry backed to the door, because his father was looking testily at him. Possibly his father was looking for an excuse for testiness, and Jerry allowed him a fair interval to find another excuse while he made that enforced toilet. Washing in the Puncheon back yard was a good hearty business, but he hated that icily clean bathroom at home, which was no place to bring dirt into. Fortunately, his absence had awarded his father other subject matter for annoyance.

". . . It's all very well for you to talk in that high handed way, Nina, but I tell you I can't afford to keep three cars."

"You needn't; get rid of the two seater and buy a sedan."

"It's no economy selling the two seater; it wouldn't fetch forty pounds."

"I'm quite sure, Walter, it would be an economy to save the amount I am forced to spend on taxis," put in Baby.

"Yes, and exactly where would that economy come in with Nina using the new car when you wanted it too. The only saving there would be to keep three cars and I tell you I can't afford it. Upon my soul, you people don't seem to realize what my expenses are. . . ."

A subject of discord very much conventionalised in modern homes. It went on, covered by those notorious captions of man the worker and woman the waster. Nina kept it up but Baby let it go. The lines of her face softened; her mask became innocent; she went on with her dinner till a silly subject could be disposed of by saying, "Very well, Walter, you can't afford it, so that's settled," and added to Nina, "I saw Fanny Tregear in Manly today; it's time we returned her dinner."

That let loose another convention of opinion in the home.

"All right, I'll take Jim," said Nina.

"No, you had better take Ronny."

"I won't, I'm sick of Ronny; you can have him."

"But I intend to ask Drake."

"Well then, we can ask Ida Quinny for Ronny. And what are you going to do about dear Fanny? Asking old Tregear is too thin, because we know dashed well he won't be allowed to go."

Baby pondered a moment and arrived at an amiable suggestion.

"Why not make up the odd number, Walter? You were complaining the other night that you wanted an evening out."

Gresham might have known that something of that sort was coming; she always punctured under a veil of innocence. Fanny Tregear! He had to accept her or qualify his claim to a little light diversion in the home circle.

"Oh, all right, she'll do," he snapped, and took it out of his dinner.

"You!" said Nina. Her tone convicted a parent of strange presumption.

"I don't want any of your cheek, Nina. I need a night out a dashed sight more than you do. . . ."

In fact, a very belittling solution to that prime affliction of his being. Its sting was that he could not come into the open and say to his wife, "Get me a reasonably pleasing young girl to dance with and you can have that car."

He carried a very honest brand of resentment back to his room, and treadmilled its carpet fuming. "Fanny Tregear! And that's about what any proposal to escape the infernal monotony of life at my age amounts to. Serve me right for putting myself under the supervision of their damned malice. . . ."

He failed to note that he lumped his wife and daughter together as one unity; the feminine ego, bent on the destruction of the male. He forgot that a nice pose of scepticism over values should have refused to make one out of a little light diversion. He carried his resentment off to town with him next day and kept it warm by fuming. That sort of thing is the nemesis of being too superior to look at life when you had life to look at.

Baby Gresham merely went to town and selected a

new dance frock. No wife knows how far the integrity of her being exists on frustrating the aspirations of her husband; good conscience simplifies that by exploiting her own.

This afternoon she came from her bedroom in a careful toilet of the school girl convention that has given mature women a devil of a problem to live up to. Bare arms, a pretty flowered frock and a fragile straw garden hat flopped over one eye. It suited her very well.

There was a little Venetian mirror in the hall that she hated, because the hard light from the door cut sharp across a face reflected in it and got at all its angles, but when she was alone she always stared intently into it; into the face of an adversary.

That hated face, mocking back its threat of time's revenges. Not her own face, which she adored, but its evil mask, which accented every hint of thinning tissue and loosened texture. . . .

Across the garden she saw Drake's big figure turn in at the avenue gates, and instantly her mask vanished and became her face. She gave it a swift tender glance; a glance of friend to friend, and went to the front room door, so that she could usher Drake into its cool soft light.

"You've never walked all the way from Manly again," she said as he came up the verandah steps.

"Why not; a delightful road for an afternoon stroll."

"In this heat. You don't look hot but I suppose you are."

"I'm not, but I'd like a drink."

She led him to the side table where he mixed a long whisky and soda and drank it with relish, glancing

about with equal appreciation at the room's flat gold walls and excellent taste in pictures.

"Queer thing that nobody walks in this country for pleasure," he said. "Why, I've walked half over Europe."

"But there are places there to walk to; here there is nowhere to go."

"Nowhere to go! You've hit it; walking is a mental exercise. I find plenty of places to walk to here."

"Then you must find yourself very good company."

"Very good."

He looked also with appreciation at her; perhaps she was one of those places to walk to. Not a very hard mental exercise to find charm in her finished profile and the wilful innocence with which she opened her eyes wide to find Drake a very entertaining fellow.

But Drake was also a hedonist of the Roman order, and never flurried a diversion out of place. He led the way to the verandah, saying, "Let us sit out here and get the best of your view; it's not a thing to waste on a day like this."

Baby would have preferred the shaded front room but she took a lounge on the verandah while Drake took possession of the view.

"I like the way this garden's been designed to pick up the coast line from the lower terrace," he said. "Those headlands are pure geological artistry. But by George, it's a gross anomaly that a coast like this should harbour such a ghastly brood of cooks. I had the worst lunch on earth at a hotel along the road there. It was so bad that I asked the manager to find out for me as a personal favour what the cook did to the food to make it taste so beastly. . . ."

Drake was genuinely indignant. As a big man with

a gastric process perfected by nature and art an insult to food was a personal affront to him. When he spoke of such serious matters his rams-horned eyebrows shot up and his long finely tempered nose came down, and his eyes, wrinkled by humour, lost it.

"A nation of food spoilers, by George. The peasants here have no reverence for the belly; that means they are incapable of reverence for anything. As a result, constipation, moral and physical. I notice advertisements for pills everywhere; no wonder the whole country is moribund. . . ."

Doors banged within and Nina came hurrying out, dressed for walking. She wore sports shoes on her bare brown legs and a little yellow felt hat like a helmet and a skimpy armless frock of brilliant patterned material, a bright thing altogether

"Hallo, Dinky, come for a walk," she said to Drake.

Drake's eyes returned to tolerance surveying her. He smiled; he was pleased; he liked synthetic unity in girls as well as food.

"No, I won't come for a walk with you, Nina," he said. "You don't know how to walk; you scuttle."

"Rot."

"Motor cars have ruined your style."

"All right, stay where you are."

She went off at that pace objected to, and Drake watched her figure down the long avenues of palms with an interest in its epicene vitality which complimented his own opulent male form.

"Nina's always in a hurry to keep that appointment that doesn't exist," he said. "It's impatience to catch up with life, of course, with life panting in the rear trying to catch up with her."

"It will catch a tartar."

Baby dismissed a topic a little exhausted of interest to ask,

"You find this country an awful place, don't you?"

"No, I like the country; what I dislike are the over percentage of awful people in it."

"Oh! And what made you leave Europe to come here?"

"Well, for one thing, I wanted to find out if any country could be as damnably uninteresting as your out-back literature . . ."

Nina kept up that resolute walk of hers along the Key Heights road till she came to the vacant allotment where there was a signboard, at which she whipped across the road and went on as far as an empty house, where she changed sides again to the baker's corner, whence it pleased her to walk along the centre of the road.

It did not please her. Behind that parade of a resolute being abroad all sorts of idiotic little taboos were busy, making her avoid one place and walk in another, or cover certain spaces in so many paces, which never came out right. Some arbitrary malignant within her made these laws and she had to obey them, because it threatened her with bad luck if she did not. It was very annoying.

But she had her safety localities, where taboos failed to operate. The garage was one of them. While making a fuss over most stinks, those of petrol and lubricating oils came sweetly to her flexible nostrils, which she worked like a rabbit when detecting an offense.

Jim Guthrie was doing something under a car, lolling on the greasy concrete floor with a mechanic's indifference to a dirty job, and Nina prodded him with her shoe till he wormed out and discovered her with

his blank stare. Billy Cowan, his young mechanic, was belting at a bent mudguard, and Nina nodded Jim to the door.

"We've a dinner dance at the Pacific next Thursday and you're my partner," she said.

"Thanks, Nina."

A trifle of affairs settled, Nina said indignantly, "Dad won't let us have that sedan, the dirty dog. All dam' rot saying he can't afford it. . . ."

She aired a pressing grievance in the home, and Jim listened with his flat stare. Once he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and stared at that too, as if a confused emotion might have come off on it. Nina discovered this obstructed attention and called attention to it.

"What's the matter with you, Jim, you look blithered."

"Me! I'm all right, Nina, what were you saying——"

"You've been drinking."

"No, I've only had a few rums."

He passed that to stare at the quiet village, where there were half a dozen people in sight. When he turned back to Nina his blank eyes had suddenly found a focus.

"I wish to God another war would start."

"A war! You must be mad."

"I'd give my guts to get away."

"You can go away without having a beastly war to go to."

"It's not only going away; it's——"

But the motive that wished to seek reality in the crude dynamic which had shattered it evaded him, and he forced his eyes to focus on Nina's face.

"You look nice in that hat, Honey, it suits you."

He looked intently into her eyes now, and his soft voice caressed her. A confession of faith for one that was lost.

"You are a dear little thing, Honey."

"Don't be sloppy, Jim. And don't forget Saturday."

She went off abruptly, without knowing what she defended herself against by flight. At the third telegraph pole a taboo jumped out at her and she had to cross the road, which was annoying, because Florrie Candler was coming towards her, and this looked like taking that creature seriously enough to avoid her. All the same, the blue high lights on Nina's black bob flicked a rejection at hair that picked up a silver sheen, like finely spun metal. Nor did Florrie hurry along the road, pursued by taboos; she moved with the lazy impertinence of a girl who lets men do all the hurrying on her account.

At the corner Nina glanced back and scurried on again in a temper. Florrie had stopped at the garage and Jim was talking to her. No doubt he was looking intently into *her* eyes and caressing her with his soft voice. Idiot! drivelling about wishing for another war and fooling with any girl that came his way. . . .

Gresham came off the Milson's Point ferry that evening in a flurry over that same disturbing problem, a girl in his way. *That* girl! They had exchanged nods at the gangway and then he had let her go ahead of him. . . .

This would not do. All the petractions of life clamoured at such poltroonery. He kept his pace behind her, maturing every moment a resolution to over-

take her and not doing so. At the garage she passed on unspoken to.

Gresham got his car out in haste and edged into the heavy traffic moving up the hill from the punt. She was still ahead, dawdling up the incline and he drove abreast of her and caught her eye. A slight pause in her step gave him his signal and he pulled into the curb.

"Can I give you a lift?"

"Thanks; nice of you."

And there it was, done; she took her seat beside him and the car moved on. Very disturbed, Gresham allowed an interval of muddled traffic to absolve him from the small talk he badly needed just then. But as they cleared the hill and gained speed he had to account for an act of amorous brigandage.

"Where am I to take you to?"

"Ridge Street, thanks." And she added, "I usually walk on to catch the tram at the corner; it saves the scramble for seats at the Point."

"Yes, that is a nuisance."

"And it's hardly worth while bringing one's own car down from Ridge Street."

That confused Gresham's preconceptions about her; he had always assumed by her regular appearance on the boats that she worked in a shop of some sort.

"You go to town a good deal,—I mean, I often see you on the boat."

"Yes, one must go somewhere."

"Yes, but women always have somewhere to go; draper's shops, I mean."

"Yes, one can always go window shopping."

Her voice was pitched throatily; the inflection that people use who have not got a voice of their own to

use. It implied also a slight boredom, a refined aspiration, a social superiority and a refusal to be superior. It got a little in the way, that voice.

But it sufficed for the short run to Ridge Street, with Gresham politely pumping up banalities for it to answer. When she stepped down from the car with her vague smile and her "Thanks, nice of you" there was a fumbling at signals on both sides, for she moved to go and stopped, and Gresham put his hand to the starter and took it away again. "Sorry you don't live further away,—I mean, I hope our next drive will be longer."

"Thanks——"

That got him away, pleased and depressed, and not at all sure whether this capture of a girl merely put him under her inspection for rejection. But it left him full of vague expectations and a conviction of enterprise, and what more can the monotony of life demand. It restored self esteem depreciated in the home circle, too; it put his price up.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS not remarkable that Gresham forgot about that dance at the Pacific, though he had taken the two seater to town and left the big car for the home circle's use. There was a conference with the financiers of the Century Theatre which excused him for forgetting it, and he was kept busy till late in the afternoon. Floyd never appeared in such matters; Gresham, suave and practiced in affairs, did all the talking.

It was after six when he returned to the office, where Floyd and his bull terrier were packing a bag with tins and parcels and bottles. They had a camp at Col-leroy for week ends and the bull terrier, whose name was Uncle Buncle, took charge of everything. He was a serious minded dog, very like Floyd in appearance, and he countenanced very few intrusions on the privacy of two gentlemen bachelors, though he unbent to Gresham, as one permitted to know Floyd and himself.

"Get them?" asked Floyd.

"Yes, I got them. At least, they got their own way over the interior decorations. I could have given them a fresco with modelled sections for a thousand; now their parsimony will cost them two, one of which will come our way. I'll see to that. But they're satisfied, they're satisfied. They are—By God, Bill, ours is a damned trade. The other arts can get away from Bab-bitt but ours can't. Just think what Sydney could be. Did ever the accident of nature throw up a more perfect design to be perfected by art, and look at it."

"Yes, I often look at it."

Gresham sat down and lit a cigarette; he felt suddenly tired. "I wish we could find some decent way of making money; burglary or coining or something of the sort. I don't want to turn out good work but I'm damned sick of turning out stodge."

"Good work becomes stodge if you turn it out long enough."

"I suppose so; I suppose I'm only transforming the boredom of fifty to the boredom of work. But damn it, when life ceases to be a serious affair one ought to find a solution to being serious about it. A little entertainment——"

The telephone bell rang and he went to it, and Nina's voice answered his sharply.

"What are you doing there; we'll be leaving here in half an hour."

"Oh Lord! I forgot; I've been infernally busy."

"You'll never get here in time to dress and come with us; you'll have to come on after dinner."

"Hang it, Nina, let me off."

"And leave an odd one out. No, you'll have to come."

"Oh, all right."

He hung up the receiver and said peevishly, "Damned if I'll hurry. Come and have some dinner, Bill, you can pick up a taxi on the Shore."

"No thanks, Uncle prefers the Manly boat."

Uncle Buncle lobbed out half a foot of tongue at that, shepherding Floyd out. There was liver sausage in the bag, and no risks must be taken with that rare thing.

Gresham dined alone in town, mentally flat after a day of arid gabble over affairs, and arrived back at Key

Heights an hour later, and bathed and dressed at leisure. Dandyism is designed to mollify discontents of the spirit, as dress clothes were designed to rid its body of loose edges. Even a loose edged male acquires precision of form by the immaculate setting of his dress shirt front. Gresham studied his aquiline nose with approval; a mood has everything to do with appearance. The patch of grey at his temples gave a smooth warmth to his skin, and the angular lines that indented his lips and cheeks became nice decisions of form. "Not at all bad; I'm really carrying it off very well," he thought.

In that complacent mood the drive along the coast road to Manly was at its best, with twilight glimpses of surf between the headlands and verandahs bright with after dinner groups in summer costumes and the road astir with cars speeding to hotels and camps along the ocean away to Palm Beach and Barrenjoey.

A band played to promenaders on the Ocean Front at Manly as Gresham parked his car at the Pacific Hotel and went across to the lounge. Jazz greeted him from the hall beyond, where he glimpsed dancing figures. By the necessity of evading an imbecile bylaw that closed hotel bars at six o'clock one ordered drinks for the evening before that hour, and Gresham was served with a cocktail. Then he discovered Ida Quinny on a lounge opposite, modestly waiting on his attention, and he crossed over with his glass at once.

"Why aren't you dancing, Ida?"

"There was one odd, so I sat out."

"Too bad; it's my fault. But I couldn't get here in time for dinner. What's Ronny doing, anyway, leaving you out like this?"

"Oh, he's dancing with Mrs. Gresham."

Ida did not express a rejection of Ronny, but it was expressed. She was a diffident girl with a hesitating catch in her voice and a shy half smile which seemed to propitiate a trick of glancing up sideways from under lowered eyelids. An effective trick; without it, attention might have passed her smoothly modelled face for what bad psychology used to call a Madonna convention. She was a school friend of Nina's, and had once been much about the Gresham house, so that Gresham's voice dropped automatically into the paternal inflection which dismisses children by being nice to them.

"I'll finish this cigarette and we'll go in, Ida. Will you have a drink?"

"Thanks; a Manhattan. May I have a cigarette too?"

Gresham held a match for her, noting her soft full hands with long sensitive fingers.

"You've grown up suddenly, Ida."

"Have I?"

"Yes, you are mature; Nina isn't. You are both the same age, aren't you?"

"Yes, twenty-one."

"And are you still at the art school?"

"No, I've left; I'm—I'm going to try and make my own living. Not at art; commercial work."

"Good idea; there's quite a good living in it, too."

Ida's voice dropped a tone, become suddenly confidential.

"I want to take a room in town, but they won't let me. I'm having frightful rows about it at home."

"What's the objection?"

"Oh, they think a girl oughtn't to go on her own."

"Silly."

"Yes. But rows are horribly depressing. And parents are such impossible people to argue with."

"I'm afraid we are, Ida."

"Oh, I only meant mine."

She dropped her eyes, fiddling with a jet bracelet. Her skin was so white that her eyelids took a bluish tint, and her dark brown hair was drawn smoothly back from her forehead, giving an artificial setting to its pallor, and her slight black dance frock had the effect of over modelling her full arms and shoulders and giving them an egg shell finish. Gresham studied these matters with approval.

"That's a charming dress, Ida."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes; you modern girls know how to dress. A minimum of decoration. You don't allow the dress to decorate you; you decorate the dress. . . ."

A pause in the music there began another dance and Gresham suddenly put down his cigarette. "Let us have this, Ida; I'll have to dance with Fanny Tregear, and she's as tall as me and two stone heavier."

Ida rose with alacrity, which may have been a desire to dance with Gresham or to escape talking to him, or merely a desire to dance. These young things put maturity to doing annoying little sums like that.

In the dance room Gresham took a fastidious possession of Ida, very anxious to assure her that there was no presumption of possession in so doing, but he forgot this discreet subterfuge for funk the moment he slid off across the crowded floor with her. Dance rhythms to Ida were clearly an instantaneous response between the senses and the muscular reflexes. She developed a flexible waist and an adhesive body that attached a partner to her by a species of suction. Gresham ceased to

be fifty on the spot. Conceit possessed him. He became not only a perfect dancer but the best looking man in the room. . . .

A prod in the back commanded him to reconsider this presumption. It came from Nina, dancing with Jim, and it marked an indiscretion and warned him not to repeat it. Across the room he caught Baby's eye. She smiled amiably, with a slight lift of the eyebrows, condoning a piece of innocence on his part, but suggesting that it had better go no further. Gresham was so angry that he forgot the flattery of Ida's undulations. The infernal arrogance of those two! His late arrival marked as an act of treachery to upset their arrangements over partnerships for the evening. Baby, of course, wished to dance with Drake and had to put up with Ronny, who could not be expected to dance with his mother, which therefore pushed Drake onto Fanny Tregear, who was almost as large as Drake. They made a stately pair, much to Drake's annoyance. Without consulting prearrangements in the home circle, he wanted to dance with Nina, who looked like a tropical creature, in a scarlet dance frock to match her inky hair and dusky golden skin, but the arbitrary young animal had fastened her clutches on that tall youth labelled Jim, who failed otherwise to identify himself in Drake's classification of the species. The only one satisfied with present partnerships was Fanny Tregear, who was very attracted to Drake. As the product of a rich rank old emancipist family, her inability to remember the convict system achieved consciousness as an adoration for Englishmen. She had been very beautiful; a Graeco-Roman brunette with enormous bedroom eyes. Her arms were magnificent; the sort of arms that really look naked.

But the music stopped there and Gresham said hurriedly to Ida, "That was delightful. Ida, you dance beautifully."

She gave him her shy smile, which was shy only as far as the downward droop of her eyelids met the upward glance of her eyes. Nina, just behind, detected both exchanges, and said sharply to Gresham, "Drinks!" in the tone that commands a waiter.

Gresham smothered all that in a hearty assumption of host, seeing his party seated at a table in the lounge and served with drinks. From that he turned an enlivened attention to Drake.

"How goes the search for a transplanted tradition?" he asked.

"There isn't such a thing in this country. The only sign of activity I can discover here is a determination to destroy anything that might lead to a tradition. Your intelligent minority is invertebrate; it lets the lowest type of official moron wipe his boots on it. Policemen as the arbiters of your culture! Lord! what a country."

"Yes, isn't it?"

"And you aren't grovelling on your bellies with shame?"

Gresham laughed. "Of course not. Why shouldn't the people be allowed to destroy themselves? It's the only virtue they can possess."

"They are destroying you."

"We don't mind."

"You have the national virus, a desire to smash all values to save yourselves the struggle to live up to them."

"Well, our virus is an antidote to yours, which still believes that something can be done with man."

"Something can be done with life, if it's only getting decent food and drink and entertainment out of it."

"You won't get them here; the tradition against them was imported from your country."

"Rot!"

"Well, have a look at the names in our telephone directories; Scotch Presbyterians, English Nonconformists and Irish Catholics. I wish you had sent us only your criminals, there might have been some hope for the country. As it was, you sent us a conglomerate of the lowest middle class mob on earth."

"Well, it was your job to kick it in the belly."

"Let us analyse for a change the magnificent freedom from middle class repressions as manifest in your England."

"It's not my England. I detest England and refuse to live in it."

"That is one of the things wrong with England too. . . ."

Discourse between two intellectuals a little overlaid the decencies of drivel in that company and Nina put a stop to it. She rose with the music, taking Jim up with her. "Dinky, that's your partner," she said, with a nod at Ida. Drake was forced to dam up a lot of things he desired to say about Australia and rose with Ida, who gave Gresham her half smile as she went. Gresham turned to Fanny Tregear with aplomb, saying, "Ours," and bravely bore her forth. Ronny giggled to Baby Gresham, "Great fun watching Nina at work, isn't it?"

"She needs smacking."

"Is this Nina's party?" asked Fanny sweetly.

"Any party is Nina's that she happens to be at," said Gresham.

"Dear girl."

"Young demon. I believe her pose of a dominant is the other side of a desire for a brutal lover who would beat her."

"Oh, don't talk your detestable modern psychology, Walter."

"It's not mine, Fanny. I didn't invent human beings."

"But you say such nasty things about them. Everything the opposite of everything else. I mean, if one has nice thoughts and emotions they are still nice even if they——"

"Come from nasty ones."

"Would you say that if I said it was nice to dance with you again?"

"I'd be sure of it."

"Then I won't say it."

Exchanges between two very old friends a little too much at ease with each other. Fanny's luxurious eyes had a slightly opaque focus; Gresham's graces as a dancer fizzled out under the deportment of a gentleman doing his duty as one. After the plastic charm of Ida's young body Fanny's bulk was three sizes too large and stuffed in the wrong places.

And Nina's infernal stage management forced him to have the next four dances with Fanny, and saddled everybody but herself with a misfit in partners. By keeping Jim to herself she forced Ronny on her mother, while Ida tacitly refused to exchange Drake for Ronny, which would not have simplified Drake's desire to dance with Nina. Thus Gresham, the prime martyr of these manœuvres, had to dance with Fanny. Between dances he muttered to Drake, "Be a decent anthropologist and take her off my hands for a dance," to which Drake

replied basely, "I won't; she's a perfect lady and I never could stand them."

"Look at those two trying to dodge mama," said Ronny to Baby, who refused to see any humour in Nina's antics. At a chosen moment she took Nina aside to say in a certain tone of quiet finality, which barely masked intention to command the services of murder if necessary, "I've had quite enough of this nonsense; I will *not* dance with Ronny the whole evening."

"All right, take Jim," said Nina, and tugged Jim into it with, "Jim, Mum expects you to dance with her."

Baby's glance at her now merely deferred the service of murder to a propitious moment. She had intended to detach Drake by attaching Jim to Ida, but Jim unexpectedly deferred proposals there without being taken into their confidence. He did this because he waltzed well and murmured across a facile rhythm into Baby's ear, "Honey, you are the most beautiful woman in this room."

Jim had never called her "Honey" before, and she found in its cadence a unique tenderness without reflecting that only long practice could have perfected it.

"I like hearing things like that, Jim, even if they aren't true," she murmured back.

"But it's true. I never look at you without thinking you are so beautiful there's no need to tell you so."

"Every woman needs to be told pretty lies like that, Jim, in spite of her own looking glass."

"No looking glass could see you as I can, Honey."

"But I can't see myself in your eyes, Jim."

"Yes you can, Honey."

They circled the room to find out if that was true. It seemed to be; however blankly Jim's eyes looked

at life, they looked at a woman with remarkable intelligence, which is to say that they found her lovely. And Baby had the art of being looked at like that. "Your eyes don't say anything about me, Jim; they only tell me nice things about yourself," she whispered.

This nice readjustment of dance partnerships left Gresham where he was, glazed with urbanity and seething under it with the discontents proper to his age and ignominy. Between dances drinks accumulated and allowed rebellion to state its case. He did that by picking Ida up and strolling to the door with her, where he remained chatting till the music should start. But Nina had her eye on this plausible move and neatly trumped it. "I'll have this with you, Dinky," she said. . . .

One more ill sorted pair joined the dance. Ida's refusal to state antagonisms left them intact, and Ronny's had to do for two. ". . . I'd like to find out why I thoroughly detest you," he said. "Something to do with your skin, I think. It's too damned white; I'd like to cut it to see if there was really blood under it. . . ."

Ida allowed her legs to dance with an automaton, but her ears ignored the sounds it made. The antipathy between those two was biological; an overdose of the ultra feminine on both sides.

An overdose of niceness between Gresham and Fanny Tregear had almost got to sniping point too.

"I always did concede that your politeness was armour plated, Walter, but do you really think it can survive one more dance?"

"Rot, Fanny, dancing's good fun under any terms. . . ."

Nina's hard little glance patronised him; he was do-

ing very well; subject to her high sense of the deportment for parents. Baby's innocence at Nina's stage management was in the best possible taste; when she could spare Gresham a glance it was frank with pleasure to see him enjoying his night out.

Gresham gave it up. Those bitches of women always won. He got the party into the lounge and ordered a magnum of champagne, and involved Drake in a falsely animated burst of talk. It was his intention to interpose drinks on the annoyance of dancing and get away as soon as possible.

The misfits of the party were glad of a well earned reprieve from their office. Fanny Tregear lay back with closed eyes and an amiable smile, which condoned boredom for an otherwise pleasant evening. Nina emanated a certain primness; she had got the decorums in order and intended keeping them there. "A pity somebody doesn't stop you two from being so intelligent," she said to Drake and Gresham, as giving them permission to make fools of themselves. Jim and Baby sat a little apart, talking in that tone of subdued intimacy which excludes mundanity from a serious view of life. Baby's manner was that of a mature woman whose interest in an amiable youth is too frankly innocent of other motives to require disguise; a piece of mendacity that made Gresham wish to slap her face. It was almost as annoying that Jim's manner to her was earnestly respectful, and one could not count duplicity a part of *his* makeup. They went back to the dance room presently, leaving mundanity to the others.

Gresham pressed the bottle on his own behalf. His spleen required an irritant, not an antidote. Splenetics about Australia helped; nothing pleased him more than to hear Drake dissecting its moral ineptitude, which

Ronny was young enough to be infected with and therefore to defend.

“. . . We've got one pull over you Englishmen, anyway. There's no one in this country to use that ghastly phrase 'It's not done.' Consequently we can do it."

"But you don't do it. . . ."

Ida had moved unobtrusively away from the table and was standing in the orchestra alcove, watching the dancing. Gresham noted that as without significance; women always win. . . .

In a manner that also disposed of significance he got up and strolled to the alcove. "My God, what a relief," he said. It was more than that, by the way Ida slid into the curve of his arm.

Nina jumped up, her cat's eyes snapping. Drake rose too, concerned for an exhibition, but Nina pushed him aside, saying, "Absurd. Ronny can't dance with his mother," and tugged Ronny up. Drake forgot himself and apologised to Fanny Tregear, who said sweetly, "Why move? It's much nicer here," and suffered a strangulation of spleen at the alacrity with which Drake seated himself. The whole convict system clamoured for the lash on Nina's back.

Gresham didn't care. Drink and malice and self esteem went to his head and ejected funk and discretion and fifty years from it. "You're the loveliest girl in this room, Ida," he said, unaware of a plagiarism on Jim's style, and Ida gave him her upward downward glance to whisper, "I love dancing with you."

That magnificent compliment about did for Gresham. He was instantly young, ardent, handsome and indestructible. Anglo Saxon attitudes may have inaugurated the modern dance, but much may be done with

them if you don't mind being regarded as a bit of an ass. Both Gresham and Ida had long legs, which are necessary to complete the arc of swooning from one syncopation to another, and make of dancing a genuflection stolen from bedrooms. A declaration of passion and almost its performance. They made a distinguished exhibition and people looked at them significantly.

Baby was one of them; just a glance, which marked, and then dismissed. But Gresham didn't care; all the malice of the home circle was behind his cheery nod back at her. All the same, he took care to keep out of Nina's way. Her eyes were pale with temper which Ronny was exasperating by fulsome adulation of Gresham and Ida.

"... Make a perfect pair, don't they? Next to ourselves the most distinguished couple in the room. See that movement; gentleman pivots slowly on one heel while twirling the lady in a complete circle from the centre outwards. This is it. Your facial work isn't up to Ida's, though. People will suspect you of not being awakened to passion unless you learn to relax the lips, loll the tongue and languish with the eyelids."

"Shut up! It's bad enough having an ass of a father making an exhibition of himself. . . ."

Gresham took no risks with that exhibition; let the family circle sink, he was not going to miss this night's fun. Instead of going to the table for a drink he led Ida out to the ocean beach and back. Nothing in that, anyway. Worse luck! He could burble nice things to Ida in a jumble of jazz and dance couples, but alone with her she was only a young thing whose legs told him nothing about her, and he had to slide back into the nice, kind paternal friend.

“. . . But suppose I got you some work to do which had to be done in town?”

“Thanks, that might help. But I know Mum; she talks about the need to protect me from getting into trouble, but the truth is she only wants to protect herself from any trouble over me.”

“That’s quite true, Ida.”

“She keeps insisting that a girl should stay at home till she’s married and then she can have all the freedom she wants. Isn’t that rot?”

“Of course; freedom ends with marriage.”

“And you can’t imagine how sick I am of a home full of relations.”

“Pests, Ida.”

Back in the dance room he was able to sink the paternal incompetent in the perfect dancer, a little at the expense of his legs, which were now protesting at an exercise of Anglo Saxon adolescence. Be damned to them, anyhow. He put them through it ruthlessly, since he was having such a good night out.

That was till he found Nina waiting for them at the door after the third stroll between dances.

“Hadn’t I better send your drinks out here?” she asked.

“Sorry, Ida, I quite forgot about drinks,” said Gresham.

“You would,” said Nina.

The company in the lounge carefully failed to connect Gresham’s return with a slight lapse in the duties of a host. Ronny was pleased with it; Baby was too engrossed with Jim to notice it; Drake had an eye only for Nina; Fanny Tregear formed a polite but slightly exhausted group of one. Manhunting a distinguished

specimen of Englishman does not propose to have him thrust into one's bag.

"Better order more champagne, Dad; your poor old legs must need it," said Nina.

"Thanks, Nina,—kind girl——"

But he shot Nina a swift glance of anger, warning her to repress any more of that sort of thing. Nina glared back and repressed it, which was perhaps a mistake. Instead, she plumped into a chair and drank off a glass of champagne. And on top of that another. She was slightly drunk, but her temper failed to note it, though everybody else did. Everybody except Ida, who lay back in a lounge chair with a cigarette. Her eyes were limpid, her lips curved in a tender smile; one could see that a charming thought detached her attention elsewhere.

Nina made a tremendous effort, but the graces of feminine malice never were a strong point with her. She sneered suddenly at Ida. Then she laughed. Then she sneered again. Then she let it out.

"Got to the swooney stage, have you, Ida, darling? Next thing you'll be sick. Booze never was your strong point; stick to innocent trusting girlhood; it's a sure card with that virgin's glad eye of yours."

"Keep that wench of yours in order, Ronny," said Gresham, striving for a hasty accent of humour.

"Can't be done; she's one of these high geared professionals, very temperamental," said Ronny.

Ida heard nothing; that lax smile of hers was astray on a charming reverie. Nina's temper had to compete with it somehow. Those two had been girlhood's impassioned friends in quest of girlhood's only secret; they must have known all about each other.

"Indian summer's catch," sneered Nina. "Very dan-

gerous to catch, these trusting virgins; they do awful things to middle aged gay dogs."

Enraged at an absurd position, Gresham turned suavely to Drake.

"As an anthropologist, you will be entertained to note that the small Australian girl suffers from a Mid-Victorian affliction of intense respect for parents. The parent's moral failure is apparent in his inability to rise to the sadistic level of his grandfather and give the small girl a damned good walloping."

"Or her papa, for having a nice nasty temper," said Drake.

He jumped up and pulled Nina to her feet, saying cheerfully, "You've been rude to me all night in public, come and be rude in private."

A discreet intervention came just in time. He got Nina to the door, but everybody was aware that she there collapsed against him and burst into tears as he steered her hurriedly into the street.

In the lounge Gresham did his best to dispose of a silly situation by accounting frankly for its cause.

"Hanged if I'll apologise for Nina's temper; everybody here knows her, so there's no need to."

"We don't mind if you don't," said Ronny.

"Of course I mind; she always turns these belittling antics on me."

Fanny Tregear smiled sweetly at him. "After all, Walter, if you really are right about all emotions arriving from their opposites, it is rather charming of Nina to object to anyone stealing you from her."

Neither Ida or Baby Gresham heard that. The music started again but no one rose to dance. A pleasant evening was officially over.

Drake had got Nina across to the beach and was

cajoling her against a space of lazy rollers and the cool infinity of the Pacific Ocean. He was being very tender with her; tender as only a big man can be with a small girl and a philosophy of life that rejects all sentiment over its imbecilities. “. . . That’s right, Nina, let it out; I like a girl who can cry; it’s almost a lost art nowadays. . . .”

Nina made a distracted fool of herself, rejecting Drake and clutching him, and weeping on him. He was a magnificent thing to weep on, expansive and vastly comforting. She required something large and dominating to supply a conception of being petted by it while being petted by it, but conflict with a real parent was too recent to substitute an image of him. The lost idiom of childhood failed her and she stopped weeping suddenly to thrust Drake off.

“Leave me alone; I don’t want you; I don’t want anybody.”

“Rot, Nina. I’m the very person you want; pitch into me if you feel like taking it out of papa by proxy. Come along; don’t be frightened of letting me find out what a dear little girl you are.”

“I’m not; I’m a beast. I detest myself; I detest everybody.”

“Quite right; detest everybody except me.”

He picked her up and kissed her throat, charmed by its essences of sun and sea transmuted to a scented aroma of youth. It was delicious being treated like that and distracted Nina more than ever because it was a cherished fantasy come to life, and that forced her to clutch at fantasy and reject reality. In that conflicting muddle all she could do was kick herself out of Drake’s arms and burst into tears again.

That was too much for self contempt to bear. She

turned and ran across the sand to the esplanade and darted to the parked cars. Drake let her go, watching the two seater back out, turn, and scoot away into the night.

"Too bad," he muttered. "Get at Nina; Nina can't get at herself. Funk, of course. What a little dynamo; lovely, too. Damn modernity; it's made the adventure of life too infernally conscious. . . ."

He combatted a profound depression; the scent of Nina's young body concreted a Roman aesthetic, which is also a Roman's despair.

Gresham turned the car into the garage, stopped the engine and switched off the lights. In the dark Baby found her shawl and made that enormous effort which is necessary to get tired legs out of a motor car. Gresham got out too, creaking in his joints, and switched off the tail light. That of the two seater was still burning and he turned it off also. In silence they moved across to the house. Neither had spoken a word since dropping the others at their homes; a silence made pregnant by the statement of mortal offenses. At the courtyard door Gresham stopped; rows were excluded from the courtyard.

"That's about settled things," he said. "I'll never go anywhere in public with you or Nina again. You both did your damndest to make me look a fool tonight."

"Oh, you didn't need any help from us."

"Pah! A night out! You lumped that damned Fanny Tregear onto me because you know I can't stand her. And because I have a couple of dances with a girl I get this sort of thing on top of a public exhibition of Nina's infernal temper."

“Oh, you asked for that, by your public exhibition of an elderly juvenile.”

Gresham wanted to smash something. “Of course! I’m an elderly juvenile for dancing with a girl and you aren’t a mature flapper for spending the night with a sentimental youth. Not that I care what you do. I’m not raising objections to you getting all the fun you can out of this damned foolery. All I say is——”

Baby had heard quite enough. She opened the door quietly and passed through it to say, “If *that’s* the understanding——”

Gresham wished to follow her and have that row out. Perhaps he wished to follow her for other reasons too, but he heard her bedroom door close with a certain quiet precision, which sent him off viciously to his own room, where he switched on the light, and took it out of his face in the mirror. Old, angular, ugly. “You would have it,” he hissed.

But he was too tired for temper; that was another retort on the rewards of a night out. He undressed with depression, thinking, “A threat! as if that wasn’t always the understanding. Well, let her, I don’t care. I’m not looking for copulation; it’s the last part of the business I want. . . .”

And all the while he was aware of Ida’s fluent young body, her white skin, her lovely legs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GRESHAM kept a just grievance in working order by rejecting a breakfast which he did not want and going off to town without a word to Nina, though she followed him out with a disdainful air to watch him go. Baby remained in bed, as she always did after a night out. Rows, once started, were finalised as far as she was concerned; that was her system for keeping them in action, but Nina rejected such Fabian tactics with a father who deliberately made a fool of her in public. There was a conspiracy in the home circle to do that; a conspiracy against the private fantasy of her being, which she kept in a little red covered book locked in a secret recess of her bedroom writing table.

She took it out now, and the frown that had marked a parent was displaced for a wilfully tender expression as she wrote these words in it:

'Dance Pacific. Beach D. Divinely tender—perfect surrender—throat X X X enchantment bliss.'

Nina's diary; Nina's life's history.

Compactly told, with a minimum of that literary consciousness which marks the amateur stylist. This very small book contained the complete story of Nina's life from the age of fourteen, packed into explosive little scrawls, dates, initials and crosses. No statement of the feminine dominant appeared anywhere in it; one found instead a melting creature, a ritualist of emotional surrender, your true feminine, wrongfully sup-

posed to exist only between the covers of ninepenny novels written for girls to read on trams. Even entries at the age of fourteen had found that nice relation between adjectival impressionism and anatomical precision by which alone an emotional crisis can be recorded. As thus:—

‘H. Kissed left cheek—kind adoring.

H. Brow twice—tender—greatly worshipping.

H. Brow three—lips one. All day thoughts of love.’

H. was a friend of Gresham’s, aged forty. His kisses, bestowed in the character of an uncle, were thus transmuted to forecast the day of Nina’s marriage to him. Other entries at this period marked a neophyte of the life devotional to godlike men. L., another mature friend of the family, inspired such tributes as ‘Brow—fondly yearning—cheek seraphic—lifetimes union—X X lips—heart sinking L. departing. . . .’

Next year was a blank; a waste of life. Not a kiss to record. At seventeen they burst into excited X’s, to the credit account of P.

‘P. in car—lips wonderful X X X X.

P. lips—long breathless X X X X X.

P. Dance—hot breathless kisses—I nearly swoon.

P. Garden—kisses kisses—red red red.

P. Beach. Lips throat ears—Hot lips pressed to mine—crushed against me—hot clinging kisses—the stars above us—hot swift kisses—soft hot kisses—passion adoring hot mad kisses our hearts wildly beating the night around us red—red—red—!!!!

E. Lips but not terribly nice.’

E. appears as an amateur intrusion on the perfect artistry of P. who seems to have deserted the creation of a masterpiece just then to practise his metier on other subject matter, for the next entry ran,

‘Vile awakening P dancing with M both vanished twice. All is over P faithless home madly despairing thoughts of death P weeping on grave.’

A figurative retribution, for P appeared practicing his art as industriously as ever, but apparently without achieving that perfect synthesis of style and dramatic continuity which is the constructive problem of all art, for there were explosive interjections on its technique such as ‘Back kitchen—nearly caught. W. a pest. Love consumed me like a red hot flame. X X in box room. People everywhere. W. pestilent expiring longing Yes or No.

P. S. Can this go on?’

It stopped, seemingly, on that desperate query, for entries accredited to P. stopped there too. P. was a friend of Wally’s, much about the house at that time. He left it empty of kisses. A few initials going about the earth at dances contributed an X or two, not terribly nice. Entries referred mainly to I. and were exclusively feminine:—

‘I. spent day here—tennis. Read together book about sex—not much—too medical.

I. stayed night. I. told me of H. Told I. of P. Took measurements. Mine are . . .’

Followed a list of Nina’s dimensions; height; waist; hips; bust, legs. List of I’s dimensions. I. was Ida.

Here and there an item had been written in and heavily scored out. Why?

At the end of that year R. appeared, and the diary erupted into X's and exclamations. R. was Ronny. He arrived as the perfect lover come at last, and straight-way established his credentials in that character.

'R. Tennis—arms thrilling—loveliest man.

R. dinner pressed feet. Verandah X X. Courtyard X X X. Garden X X X X X X delicious wild kisses exciting thrilling madly adorable R.

P. S. Biting.

R. Divinest dancer—almost swooning thrilling. Extravagant kisses red red red. All must follow all—all all.'

Entries failed to endorse that. At a crescendo acclaiming the perfect lover destructive criticism was suddenly ejected at him.

'R. Conceited ass—bad temper demanding wrestling thrilling but not enchanting.

P. S. Admit perfect dancer.'

On that admission which dismissed him, Ronny's claims to love remained. Yet he remained, which was significant; the only initial exercising X's. X's deleted of adjectives, jotted down in the perfunctory terms of a grocer's account:—

'R. Beach—ices—temper.

R. as usual.

R. X X X and wrestling.

R. X X X and temper. . . .

Now D. appeared, credited with Nina's perfect surrender to a divinely tender love episode, under which caption Drake would hardly have recognised that distracted little interlude on the Manly ocean front.

Drake would not have recognised himself under any terms in Nina's eyes, since all men live by the comfortable illusion of an intellectual conception of themselves, and Drake was an anthropological hedonist who went about among peoples to see what diversion they had to offer as a spectacle and a speculation. If they also offered him a love affair, which they often did, he took it as an item in a process, and not as a singularity on it. Thus there were plenty of vital brown skinned girls on the beaches who might have offered Drake a love affair or a distracted rejection of one. Nina merely came under the latter heading. . . .

He came up from the surf that afternoon vigorously towelling his crisp hair and getting everything out of blue skies and racing seas and the brightly patterned beach. To that arrived a special refreshment to the eye; Nina in a scarlet bathing costume emerging from the line of parked cars facing the ocean beach. She hopped down to the sand, but her habit of rejecting inspection missed Drake till he flipped his towel at her.

"You do look a brilliant little devil," he said.

Nina covered a flush by bending to tie a red rubber sandal. Her jaunty little surf cap was red too, and her arms and legs the colour of a new penny. When she rose, her flush had forgotten anything that might have happened on that beach last night.

"Coming in, Dinky?" she asked.

"I've just come out."

"Come in again." She was edging off and Drake followed her.

"Don't run away, Nina, listen. If I wait here will you come to my flat for afternoon tea."

"Can't; I've got Ronny with me."

"Damn Ronny."

Ronny had remained in the car to take off his shoes and shorts and now stepped forth almost as brilliant as Nina in a maroon bathing suit cut very low at the back and breast. As Nina was skipping off to dodge Drake Ronny only waved to him and ran down to join her. They dived together under the first breaker, swam to the next, and from that to the outer rim of surfers; the elect of ocean devotees.

"Damn Ronny," repeated Drake to himself. "All the same, those narcissus self adorers aren't any real use to a woman. . . ."

He remained watching those two out there swim to meet an oncoming wave and come tearing inshore on its crest in a pother of foam. When they turned to scamper back Nina dived between Ronny's legs and pulled him under. He came up to grab her and turn her upside down to smack her. They went under grappled and rose apart to race again for the outer ring of surfers.

"Same time, women are too cocksure of themselves with those Ronny's," added Drake.

He turned to stroll on, and his eye revived interest in the crowded beach, a setting in three flat planes of colour; an ultramarine ocean ribbed with white breakers, sand splashed with costumes from a modernist palette, striped marquees and sunshades and the fine avenue of Norfolk Island pines fringing the whole length of the beach. Drake had taken a flat at Manly because these ocean fronts were the only places in Australia where he saw life trying to take definite form;

conscious of itself; seeking to free the human body. . . .

Nina came out of the surf with Ronny and cast a glance about that admitted relief and suppressed regret.

"Dinky's gone," she said.

"I don't mind," said Ronny.

He stretched himself on his back so that he could extend his arms and flex them and admire them. Nina pulled off her cap and fluffed out her hair to let her face tan evenly. From that a mislaid train of thought caused her to frown and say,

"That was a disgusting exhibition of Dad's last night."

"What utter rot."

"It was."

"You made the disgusting exhibition."

"Did I! D'you think I was going to sit there and let him make fools of us by—Everybody noticed it. At his age, too——"

"Just dirty nark on your part. Besides being a jealous little blighter you've got a nasty cranky wowser streak in you."

Nina disposed of opinion on a dominant by sneering at Ronny's complacent attention to his arms.

"Pretty boy."

"Handsomest man on the beach," corrected Ronny.

"Pooh! You're only a movie magazine cover. Now there's a really handsome man; that life guard over there."

"That! Average crude athlete."

But he turned over on his stomach to study the group of male surfers with almost the same inflection of criticism as Nina. They were all of a type; beautifully built creatures with hard-angled sardonic faces and defined nose bridges. Drake's quest of a tradition might

have found them repeated in a hundred Roman portrait busts. Back into clothes, of course, a racial genesis vanished in clerks, truck drivers, shop assistants, mechanics. . . .

Nina's mask that rejected inspection lapsed a moment, staring at their brown limbs and faces. One of the youths caught her glance and returned it with a lift of one eyebrow, as saying, "Me, do you mean?" Abruptly Nina abolished a pretentious fool and turned away.

"Come on, the surf's too good to waste," she said, rising in one swift easy movement.

"It'll be good anywhere down the coast today. What about Jonah's for tea and a run down to Palm Beach?"

They disputed that, antagonism flaunted at Ronny from Nina's polished legs and abrupt little breasts, taut under her single garment. . . .

But they drove along the coast road to Jonah's, perched on the heights above Whale Beach, and ate crisp toasted scones, crumpets and rare cakes, served on the verandah that overlooked miles of ocean; blue purple from that height, and flicked with the sails of ocean racing yachts, and smudged at the horizon by the smoke of steamers going north and south.

Those jaunts were formalised. They drove over to the headland, where the seas broke two hundred feet below on its sandstone bastions and there sat to smoke and enjoy the view.

Small attention the view got. Antagonism was the attraction that brought these two together, and fighting is one way of consummating an intimacy. They embraced by grappling; hissed kisses; kept overtures in action by their rejection, and invitation by insult.

“. . . Rotten little cow,—teaser,—prude. You're a good girl . . .”

“Don't you wish you were a bad devil.”

“Pickled virgin; that'll be your finish. I don't want you but by ginger, I'll take the skite out of you.”

“Dangerous Ronny; no girl is safe with him. . . .”

In fact, Ronny was one of Nina's safety zones; those scraps with him placated her dignity as well as certain other unrests of her being. She always came back from them feeling so safe. But they ruffled Ronny a good deal; he had a less complacent mechanism than Nina's to put up with.

They came home by back roads, winding in among the orchards, which allowed them to pass a dung cart drawn up at a lane near Potts dairy farm, with Mazie Potts in converse with it over a fence. Jerry got hurriedly behind the cart, but was detected.

A mere item in the interlacing of two circles, but very annoying, when you are forced to lumber after love in a dung cart, while sneaks from the home speed away from it in a fast car.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALL detections gave Jerry an anger and dismay out of all significance to the thing detected. The doom of the isolate was already his; the awful consciousness of being under inspection. Even being observed by the wrong people carting cowdung in the service of the beloved brought it to the surface. It attacked him sometimes when quite alone and forced him to glance hurriedly behind him. It was the motive that detached him from the special inspection of schoolmasters. It penetrated his fantasies in the invention of perfect hiding places wherein he was divinely secure, while anyone attempting to get at him from without was blown up by mines, precipitated into pits, electrocuted on charged wires or asphixiated by poison gas. When abroad this secret corruption of his being took the form of a sudden misgiving that he had left one of his private caches open, but in that event he always arrived home to find it sealed. When he did leave one open he never remembered anything about it, which was the evidence that he harboured within himself treachery to his dream of isolation.

Nina knew all about his secret hoards. That goes without saying; she was a sister; no cult of honourable conduct could reach her. She pried into them for instruction and sometimes got a little, though she never would have admitted that. Amusement at the exposures of a witling male supplied her with a pretext for these domiciliary visits, and she got a good deal of that too.

That was the Sunday afternoon that Jerry had gone forth to meet Mazie Potts at Minter's corner, and had forgotten his usual tribute, which brought him hurrying back to find his cupboard open and Nina inspecting that very work.

Blazing with indignation he snatched it from her and hurled it into the cupboard.

"Hellish cheek; my private affairs," he spluttered.

"Yes, you ought to hide them; I never read such drivel," said Nina, transferring her exposure to him.

"Mind your own dam' business."

"'Fierce fiery kisses,'" quoted Nina, and drove Jerry frantic.

"Clear to hell," he yelled.

"'Give ear to passion's pleadings

And soothe its anguished smart,'" again quoted Nina, adding as a footnote, "That awful grubby little creature Mazie Potts."

Jerry propelled himself at her as a catapultic act of ejection and banged the door on her. "Passion's posturings," commented Nina as she went.

No doubt Jerry was practicing for a freed imagery in art, for a detection of its exercise fermented him with fury. He hissed expletives, hammering up the catch of his cupboard, which would now have to be reinvented. He must have left it open. It appalled him;—such is the innocence of your freed imagist, to discover duplicity within himself pandering to perfidy without. "Dam' you blast you things left open sneaks like Nina blast you dam' you," he mouthed, darting from one privacy to another and madly accounting for works before dashing forth again without the special exhibit he had come back for.

Any proposed meeting with girls always agitated

him like a pregnant disaster, but now he so compacted rage with lyricism that he galloped all the way to Minter's Corner, cutting through fields and orchards and sprinting down back lanes till he came out on the heights at least half an hour ahead of his appointment. Peter was already there and the pair at once grasped arms and plunged together in an excess of relief to find that friendship still existed in a treacherous earth.

"Not come yet," said Jerry, anxiously inspecting distances.

"No, they'll do us in as usual."

"Third time they've done us in."

"Hardly worth while coming out to be done in every time."

Hope dictated these denials of its rewards. They screwed incessantly from this direction to that, reconstructing a blessed vision of girls approaching. Expectation of that event drew no substance from past experience of it. Peter and Jerry *had* met Mazie Potts and Elsie Stimson at Minter's Corner, which perhaps explained why those ladies now failed to arrive there. Sycophancy in a lover may be demanded, but not for that reason rewarded. With a royal perception of her favours, Mazie could not possibly concede them, so they had to be extorted from her. Pride demanded strenuous endeavour in a lover, which Jerry left to beseeching for graciousness. It was his mistake to have rather a higher sense of Mazie's price than Mazie had had herself. As for Elsie, she was one of those small girls who exist as parasites on the initiative of a girl friend. All proposals are referred to that friend under the heading of "I will if you will!" Thus enterprise in Peter was deferred by Elsie to Mazie's rejection of a lack of it in Jerry, which left the whole business

stranded at Minter's Corner, dolorously striving to account for a sunlit earth empty of girls.

"Hanged if I seem to get the strength of young Mazie," complained Jerry. "Point is, Pete, do you reckon she's a cold girl?"

"Point is, do you?"

"Well, I think she must be, because I never managed to work her up a second."

Peter groaned; this was a very terrible question. "Marvellous thing is, how do they manage to keep cold?" he asked.

"By ginger, I've asked myself that a million times. Take the way a chap does his block in over a girl. There he is in a hell of a stink over her and the girl as cool as custard. All I say is girls must have practically an iron will."

"God lumme, they *must* have, because it stands to reason they can't be absolutely cold."

These excursions into the devilish economics of feminine self esteem depressed them, and they stared glumly at the long empty road, where there was room for an army of girls to come marching. But only Bill Purfroy turned a corner riding a magnificent black stallion, which came along at a strapping pace till abreast of Jerry and Peter, who Bill greeted by swerving the stallion inward. The heavy grip of his thighs seemed to impell the powerful brute downward as he heaved it to a standstill, all four feet firmly planted and tossing foam from a champed bit. They made a fine pair, for Bill was a big black haired beefy fellow, darkly tanned, rather like the stallion in appearance, if not in potentialities. The stallion's eyes were fiery with a splendid destiny, while Bill's were bovine, fixed, and quite expressionless.

"Day, Bill."

"Day, Jer, day Pete."

A pause. In the land of bucolics conversation knows nothing of windy generalities, and must spring like other produce from the soil itself. Jerry patted the horse, admiring him.

"Travelling him this season, Bill?"

"Well, yes, got dates fixed for August."

"He's a great horse."

"Yes, he's a good horse."

"Puncheon's putting their mare to him?"

"Well, I did hear from Ed they was thinkin' of tryin' a foal from that brown mare of theirs."

"Good little mare, that."

"Yers. Bit on the light side. . . ."

And so on. Jerry and Peter talked seriously to Bill of these matters, while Jerry's eyes incessantly followed the stallion's curves; the second great feat of synthetic form building the earth has seen. An intellectual adoration, untroubled by desire, save perhaps the desire to cut a good figure on horseback, which comes next to cutting a good figure before girls. If one understood Bill's bovine eye, both poses of conquest achieved an equal value in breeding horses or humans, or for that matter, cabbages.

"Well, I must be gettin' round to Puncheon's," said Bill, and went, and they watched him down the road, the stallion's great quarters flashing violet highlights back at the sun.

"Nice fellow, Bill," said Peter.

"Yes, there's something dashed nice about those chaps. . . ."

Tribute to the good peasants of earth, who never

know that art exists. Jerry turned a resigned look at a stage setting lacking its most urgent need.

"They aren't coming, Pete."

"No, they've done us in."

"Better go, I suppose."

They found it hard to go, for even feminine ruthlessness an hour late might still relent. It did not, and drifting and dawdling, and filling in wasted time, they got back to the Key Heights road, where Jerry's mental restlessness remembered a diversion.

"We may as well do a bit of setting," he said.

"All right. That reminds me; I asked Jim Guthrie to see if he could fix our press."

"Good idea; I never thought of him. We'll just nip into our place while I get the novel."

Sunday is calling day, and there were cars in the Gresham drive, and Jerry went round the back way to avoid an objectionable function. When he returned Peter was talking to Jim Guthrie at the front verandah, where Nina idled too.

"All right, Pete, I'll run up in the trawler and get it."

"It's only a bit off the straight, Jim."

"That'll be easy, Pete, I'll fix it."

"I hope you aren't doing business with those two, Jim," said Nina. "They've gone into the manure trade. At least Jerry has. Been seen carting mysterious hoards of cowdung to some secret store. Don't go too close to him; he carries samples about with him."

"You go to hell," said Jerry, signalling Peter forth from insult.

"Too bad, Nina," said Jim. "They're nice lads. . . ."

"Dam' cat; I never take any notice of her," said Jerry to Peter.

The Tregear home was on Key Heights road too; one of those old square two-storied stone houses built in the forties, when there were very few houses at all in the district. Jerry savoured pleasure on entering its big overgrown garden, for this was Peter's home, and not his own. Peter's frown automatically rejected it for the same reason. The usual group of Sunday callers were at tea on the verandah which sent them round by side paths to the back yard. A good yard; even Peter admitted that, with its stone stables and outhouses once inhabited by the assigned servants of the convict system. In one of these Peter and Jerry had made a spiritual home. They kept their printing press here, and Peter's Rabelais with Doré's illustrations, that holy book. Its only failure as a spiritual home was that being within the home they could not bring girls there.

Peter got its key from under a certain brick and paused at the door, astonished. A girl in a ham frill cap had come to the kitchen door to deposit tea leaves in the dust bin. Seeing Peter she waved the teapot at him. Peter couldn't believe his eyes; it was Florrie Candler. Treading gingerly, as one who fears to startle a blessed vision back to thin air, he approached the kitchen door.

"You don't mean to say you're working here, Florrie?"

"Why not, Pete?"

"No, but are you?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"Well, I'm sugared."

He was staring at her with such a confession of being enchanted as well as sugared that Florrie laughed in his face.

"You're a card, Pete. Run along, now; I've got

fresh tea to make for another batch of your ma's friends."

She went inside and Peter returned to Jerry, staring incredulity.

"What do you think of that; she's absolutely working here," he said. It was as one would say "A sylph from Paradise has come to be our slavey."

"By ginger, you're in luck, Pete."

"I'd be in luck if it wasn't for that cow Ronny; I bet he chases her. I don't suppose she'd look at me anyhow, a girl like Florrie."

"Still and all, it's nice having her about the place."

They repeated in various terms that it was nice having girls like Florrie about the house while they sorted out leads and set their composing sticks. There a delectable subject of conversation lapsed, because you can't even think about girls while setting type. Breathing hard, constantly picking up and discarding wrong letters, losing the context and making tremendous efforts to read type backwards, they marked a proposal of high endeavour, if not its attainment.

The proposal was to set up and print one of Jerry's novels. . . .

The trouble was that they had only enough type to set four pages, and their small hand pull press would only print two at a time. Moreover, it had a twist from the perpendicular which refused to allow a nice adjustment of type and pressure, so that they were forced to wad the tympan with blotting paper, which had a very perforating effect on printed matter. They had been at the job for three months and had eight pages printed. The work of a long and busy lifetime was before them.

Ronny strolled into the yard, killing a little of the

death of time labelled Sunday. For an interval he jerked stones about idly till he discovered the earnest printers, and came across to extract entertainment at their expense.

"The Bogwallah Banner," said he. "Read our great serial 'Passion's Purple Patches.' High powered love episode in a packing case."

"Who asked you to stick your nose in here?" demanded Peter.

"What's the next chapter on? Joy riding in dung carts? Ought to get something snappy out of that, with the gallant hero potting pa with hard 'uns while the brave girl sorts out fresh ammunition."

"Get to hell out of this," roared Peter, enraged at insults to Jerry's masterpiece.

"Put me down for a copy. Of course the Commonwealth Government will censor it. Quite right, too. Can't have you reckless young moderns upsetting our legislators' repressed lust complexes. Personally I think the manure school of novel has had its day. . . ."

He drove Peter frantic. Jerry went on setting austere, pretending not to hear these comments on the novel. He thought it too bad that Peter should have to endure shame on his account. By offering at Ronny's silk shirt with the lye brush Peter got him out and locked the door, breathing the rage that only a brother can inspire.

". . . I'll get that cow yet; he'll go too far. As it is I'm nearly up to his weight. And he must have got in here and read our proofs. What can you do with the bastards?"

Jerry gave that up. What could you do, enforced to produce works which the wrong people looked at?

Being at Peter's place, Jerry dined there, which

made the meal a penance to Peter, not because Jerry was there, but because the family was there in Jerry's presence. Worse than that, no special deference was paid to Jerry; conversation was not deferred to him; Peter's mother only remembered him to make a falsely amiable remark just to show that she remembered him, which Jerry was forced to answer with equally false meekness. Moreover, there were exposures going on at that table which no self-respecting rejector of a family desires an audience for. There was the way Ronny and his mother talked, for example, a certain inflection, which excluded all others as inferiors by an understood excellence in themselves. Ronny's staccato impertinences made a point of overstating it and Fanny Tregear's niceness went a point further by never stating it. This art of exclusiveness was seen at its best when a servant entered Fanny's presence. Instantly Fanny was unaware that servants existed, while allowing a distant strand of consciousness to be aware of their functioning, as if dishes arrived at the table by supernatural agency. With drooped eyelids, and an immaculate indrawing of her being from impure contacts, she found dishes before her and served them, and spirit hands whisked them off round the table. Only when a servant had left the room there was expressed a faintly stressed return to niceness; an ordeal had been endured and an offense removed.

It was bad enough to have your mother acting the goat like that in front of a friend, but not to be endured when a sylph from Paradise like Florrie Candler had to wait at table as if she wasn't there. Worse still to have a cow like Ronny giving her a reassuring wink as she went out, which patronised her and dismissed her till such time as Ronny might find her worth a little

diversion. And then, the dirty dog, to retort that on Peter's lowering scowl as a flippancy at Peter's expense.

"Nice taste in housemaids, Mum; where did you get her?"

"Ronny!!"

"Quite good-looking; does the house credit. All the same, you'd better keep an eye on the passionate printers. These young modern manurists will do anything to work up copy. It's the vulgar passion for self revelation. 'Slaveys I have been seduced by,' 'My mad life in back kitchens. . . .'"

"Ronny, I beg!——"

Fanny Tregear's eyelids refused to raise themselves till with a slight shiver, a loathsome topic was disposed of. Peter's scowl marked Ronny for death. Jerry attended carefully to his dinner. This was to assure Peter that he marked no disgraces going on at that table.

Nor did Peter's father, but that was to reject subject for comment by rejecting the process of comment. A blocked out buttoned up man with tremendous powers of silence. His mouth was one of those ruled slits designed to shut, not open; his square deal board face was set in splints to defeat it of letting loose an expression. As a solicitor, he was aware that speech was an Awful Trap. When forced to speak he formed short dry gritty sentences designed to frustrate anyone getting at him on a point of law. Whatever attention he may have brought to bear on sounds made by clients in his office became a precaution against hearing them in his own house.

He was, in short, Fanny Tregear's husband, and after twenty four years of married life, what other sort of husband could she have had.

Now, when he had picked every crumb of cheese separately from his plate, folded his napkin, and walked precisely to the door, he spoke, with his deal board face to the deal board door.

"I shall be going out tonight. To the club. Till ten."

Fanny Tregear raised her eyebrows slightly, as not altogether condoning an indecorous revelation. Without turning her head, she said,

"I shall be out myself till eleven; possibly later. I am expecting a ring from Elenor about tomorrow night's theatre party. Someone must be here to answer the phone."

"I won't be; I'm going out myself," put in Ronny.

Mr. Tregear said to the door, "The housemaid will be here to answer the phone."

Fanny Tregear said to the air, "The housemaid will not be asked to answer private messages."

Mr. Tregear did not then dash the door from its hinges. Far from it. He opened it precisely, passed through it, and closed it carefully after him.

When Peter had got Jerry into the decency of their printing lair, he said, "Don't those two take it out of the old man. Got his orders to stay at home and blooming well takes them. You'd think he'd have the guts to tell Ronny to go to hell, but he never does. Takes it out of me, though, making me go in for law. Says I've got to start at the university next month. Hell, isn't it? Fat chance he'd have of making Ronny do anything. That cow will never work; does what he likes with the old woman."

And he added with gloom, "By ginger, Florrie won't last here long if she catches Ronny chasing her."

He went to the door and glanced at the kitchen

windows to assure himself that Florrie was still there, and to refresh himself with her as a rare spectacle. She was helping poor old Aggie Menders the cook to wash up, and Aggie's squawks of protest at irreverence and possibly ribaldries from Florry made a seeming sport of kitchen work.

Greatly enlivened, Peter said, "We'll go in there when the old woman's gone out."

They went, and a very pleasant evening they had. That was understood, Florrie being present, lolling on the kitchen table with her ham frill cap awry, and swinging legs no sylph from Paradise ever owned, because their stockings were miraculously plumped with the warm white flesh of earth.

They told yarns, too, and you need to be nineteen, and not a commercial traveller, to know what a delectable diversion that can be, when your audience is a golden giggling housemaid and a squawking protesting but avidly listening cook. Poor Aggie had to squawk and protest, because she was a tall gaunt spinster, of forty seven, with an aghast eye, due to incessant alarms to her virginity, which she had been defending for at least forty years, never knowing what moment would be its last. Still, she had a kind heart, for ribaldry fascinated her, and she vastly exhilarated its metier by her outcrys, which she delivered with breathless speed and accuracy, as if she had learned them off beforehand.

" . . . God spare you, Florrie Candler, for a low-minded wretch egging on those two brats that don't need it, a warning to me this minute that the young are no better than the aged, which I know to my horror for my very last place had a grandpa looking through the window with me having a wash all over in a hand

basin like the eye of God and whiskers too he had the image of God himself gave me such a turn I up and heaved the jerry at him. . . .”

Alchemy of the spirit in the home; which ceased to be the home by having girls like Florrie in it. Even poor old Aggie became a human being instead of a distracted slab of virginity banging pots about a stove.

CHAPTER NINE

WITH genuine annoyance Gresham said to Floyd, "The Pyle Syndicate won't have our nice Edwardian granite façade. They want a perfectly plain white front with an arched vestibule reaching to the second story and coloured tile entablatures under the cornice. What the hell do they mean by trying to have decent ideas?"

"They haven't any ideas; young Filson's been talking to them."

"Yes, he's just got back from America. But by George, if that sort of thing starts here we'll have to start thinking seriously about it too, and I'm hanged if I can stand the notion of sweating over new ideas at this date."

Floyd only grinned.

"But I tell you it's serious," fumed Gresham.

"No, it's only funny. Don't worry; they'll let young Filson talk and then come to us as usual. They're a damn sight more scared of trying to think than you are."

"It's not a question of thinking; they're automatic. One does the new thing and the rest all follow. I don't like it. Making money is a pest, but I'm hanged if I want to be stopped from making it."

Gresham grabbed at excuses like that for a counter irritant to the unrests of fantasy, which made him take the car daily out of its course to pass Ida's home at Wahroonga, without chancing to see her. It also made

him take such boats that would avoid a meeting with the girl who lived at Ridge Street. Perhaps she had served her turn; it is a notable fact that to start an affair with one girl inevitably draws another into action. . . .

But of course he met her; dodging a girl makes that also inevitable. They came through the turnstiles together to catch the six o'clock boat, and Gresham was instantly elated by a rare event.

"What a pleasure:—I was just thinking of you."

"Thanks; nice of you."

A machine got that out in her false flutey voice.

"Yes, I was wondering why I hadn't seen you lately. . . ."

On the upper deck of the ferry he led her to a seat under the wheel house, which screened them from the deck. There, seated beside her, his aplomb was momentarily winded for something to say. She left initiative entirely to him, with that trick of dropping her eyelids to meet the charmingly silly upward tilt of her chin, as if about to be photographed at her best angle.

But she had a book and Gresham took it to say, "Good fun, these murder mysteries . . ."

There was a name scrawled largely across the title page, 'Mildred Clint.' Perhaps it was her visiting card. With the vague shame every man has at speaking his own name aloud Gresham said,

"May I introduce myself; my name is Walter Gresham."

Mildred nodded; she knew that already, but her slowed-down manner left the talking to him.

"I don't feel like a stranger to you; I can remember you for years back."

"Really."

"Yes. I can prove it, too. Do you remember when the girls wore big loose brimmed hats, before the present little close fitting affairs came in?"

"Oh yes, quite well."

"Do you remember losing one off the ferry once. You took it off and put it on the seat and the wind blew it overboard."

A dawning of vague astonishment came into her eyes, which she turned on him for the first time.

"Fancy remembering that. I was only fourteen. And I felt a *frightful* fool."

"You didn't look it. You only gave the floating hat a calm glance and then seemed to forget all about it."

"Did I? I know I felt awful with people staring at me sitting there without a hat."

"Yes, I stared too. You looked very nice without a hat."

"Thanks."

That perfectly uninflected voice made it hard to decide how far graciousness at a compliment proposed to reward it. Gresham combatted confusion between the uncertain quality of her as a real thing and the vital reality of all his mental images of her.

As a real thing there was still much to reassure an image of her. Her hat was a pale blue straw to match her eyes, and it incased her small head completely, leaving only two curves of hair at the cheeks, like flat gold brush strokes to set off her complexion, which had the smooth clarity of a child's.

With his elbow on the seat behind her, just brushing her shoulder, Gresham became suddenly animated.

"I've always had a notion I would meet you some-

time. I've always wanted to. I've met you in imagination hundreds of times."

"Fancy."

"Yes. And the queer thing about an attraction like that is that it isn't altogether due to the attractiveness of the girl, but to a sort of feeling that you have the right to know her. I mean—there are plenty of attractive girls who never give you that feeling. You know at a glance that they always would be strangers, even if you got to know them. I never had that feeling about you."

"Really?"

"Never. Can you explain why?"

Of course it was now her cue to explain that this mysterious attraction was mutual. Nagged at by his fifty years, Gresham required that the spoil of an amorous brigand should also establish his credentials as one. But she only gave a slight lift of her eyelids at him, as if it was a trouble to get them wide open.

"Perhaps it's Fate," she said.

"Er—yes; perhaps it is. . . ."

Gresham retreated on the toes of his fifty years to talk about the Harbour bridge. Perhaps advances on a ferry boat had best stay at a casual acquaintance on one, which was confusing, with her scent and her charm and her silly pretty face busy with all the prearranged advances of fantasy.

In that state of mind he was shepherding her carefully across the gangway when a pleased voice behind him said, "Hallo, dad."

It was Wally. In the press of people separating them Gresham had a brief respite to damn an intrusion from the home circle before Wally caught up with them.

"I chanced getting you on this boat, dad, as I just missed you at the office. Bit of luck; I've only got a bus fare as far as Pymble. . . ."

Gresham was vacillating over the absurd policies of his position, hoping that Wally only intended to borrow money and so could be disposed of. But he was quite sober, which was unpropitious, and his brisk glance now discovered Mildred a pace away, hesitating at going or staying. Forced to dispose of policy, Gresham said hurriedly "Oh, this is my son Wally, Miss Clint."

"How d'you do," said Wally, appraising a girl on the spot. "You aren't going anywhere?" he asked innocently of Gresham.

"Oh no, I'm only going to run Miss Clint as far as Ridge Street."

They moved on, Wally putting Gresham quite at ease on his account by taking charge of Mildred. "I like watching a crowd like this," he told her. "It proves that human beings are really descended from sheep. Look at the backs of all those people moving up the ramp; more like sheep than sheep. I mean the men, of course. Now all the girls look different from each other, even from behind. That's because girls are descended from cats, snakes, and parrots. . . ."

Gresham left them to walk ahead and get the car, ashamed of Wally's shabby clothes, envying him his magnificent assurance with girls, and more annoyed with him still for having affixed paternity on a father at the wrong moment. Condemned as a parent, Gresham drew the car in to where they waited and said pleasantly,

"You two had better sit behind. . . ."

He got to Ridge Street as quickly as possible, speeded

there by Wally's easy flow of talk behind him, which Mildred punctuated with her lax 'Really's' and 'Fancy's' in the same lack of inflection bestowed on Gresham. At Ridge Street a polite convention deposited her on the pavement, and Gresham did his best to apologise for it by a self commiserating glance, which her vague nod may, or may not have endorsed. Wally climbed over to the front seat as the car moved off and gave her a cheery wave. "Got all her looks on the outside," he added to Gresham.

Gresham had meditated saying, "The daughter of a client of mine" but did not. Wally accepted the presence of any girl for reasons understood, and to have explained one away would merely confirm it. But Wally had serious matters to talk about just then, which disposed of trivialities concerning a father.

"The fact is, dad, I want to have a yarn with you. I've come to the conclusion that I've been on the wrong tack about work and I'm going to make a complete break with things and start fresh. . . ."

There were two events which always brought Wally back to the Gresham home; one was when he had acquired a new love affair and the other when he had escaped from it. At each crisis he suffered an urge to tell his father all its details, and when Wally went into details he spared neither himself, or Gresham, or the resources of colloquialism plus the terminologies of modern psychology which have done so much to confound an elucidation of their subject matter. When Wally wanted money he called for it at the office and bolted straightway on getting it, but it took him a week end at home to establish his integrity as a lover. He never asked for money in the home, except a fare

back to town. By whatever means Wally acquired a fare to go anywhere, somebody had to pay for his return trip. On the same principle he spent his weekly dole the moment he got it, in order to have a conscience free week to go on drinking in. None of Wally's friends ever had money yet all managed to get as much booze as they wanted. This is a mystery touching the communism of booze that has never been solved.

But he always arrived on a new love affair sober, and with a tremendous contempt for fools who squandered its lyric in the homosexual cult of liquor.

Now, in possession of Gresham's private room he indulged the autobiographical passion that must account for the reality of its hero by at least talking about him.

“. . . She's lovely, dad, the loveliest girl I ever kissed. It's obvious that a man only picks up stray girls to find out the charm they don't possess. Another obvious fact; we never find it till we need it. The proof of that is that I've known her for years; met her dozens of times at parties lately and never noticed her beyond the average. But the other night, Thursday, we had a party at Wilkin's room and she was there. It must have been about half past eleven——”

“I notice, Wally, that most of your love affairs begin about half past eleven——”

“Dad, don't confuse this with a love affair. Love affairs be damned. What's a love affair but an act of bisexual antagonism. We need a new terminology to define love. I'll give you its key word:—peace. Peace! Dad, I can prove it. The moment I put my arms round her I felt a divine peace. Here's another

proof; I didn't try to possess her. Didn't want to. Don't want to——”

“Let me see, Wally, I think I remember——”

“Dad, don't make that mistake; I know the bitch you're thinking about; that blackmailing body-snatching little cow Myra. She was in the family way to Wilkins and tried to shove it onto me, and by God, if we hadn't managed to put her off on poor old Bill Jollop she'd have had one of us for it. And look at what a hell of a life she's given Bill since he married her; smashes every bottle he brings into the house——”

“No, dad, I'm really serious about this. This is not an affair with a girl. To hell with girls. This is an escape from them; a reconstruction of myself. It's only by centralising the action of life in a girl and getting its one reward of peace that work is possible. When I marry Ida——”

“Ida?”

“Ida Quinny. I want you to meet her, dad. She's lovely; got one of those skins a white kid glove tries to imitate. She's got the pure feminine body; moulds itself into an embrace. She's got——”

“Yes yes, I know Ida's list of perfections. You forget she was Nina's school friend. Besides, I met her again recently.”

Wally looked annoyed for the moment. “Damn it, yes, I'd forgotten that. That's queer. Why should I——”

He paused, a conscientious self investigator of an evasion in the subconscious. As an exercise, it allowed him to drop one investigation in the method for another.

“And that reminds me, dad; about Nina. Ida told me about the way she went on at that dance. Obvious

exposure of an infantile fantasy. Nina always had that kink. Remember when she was ten she pretended to poison herself with red ink because you and mum went to a dance. Remember—But the point's clear; lover fixation on the father. She can't get rid of you. Dad, you'll have to unfix yourself."

Gresham became suddenly testy.

"Wally, you are under the delusion that a sapient analysis disposes of an emotional complexity."

"Dad, apply the analysis as a means of getting rid of the complexity. Quite simple."

"Oh, quite."

"Purely a matter of transference."

"Of course."

"Get at the basis of the infantile fantasy and remove it."

"Yes yes, I'll do that first thing tomorrow."

"Dad, I'm serious."

"Wally, you are an intelligent young ass. Nina's state of mind is the commonplace of any young girl muddled over the problem of finding a life for herself detached from the life of her parents. It is false logic that finds the parent the cause of these disturbances in the child; the cause must be in the creature who manifests its effect. You can boil down all the sapient terminologies of modern psychology to one simple issue, and that is whether youth is going to say yes or no to its own action of will."

"Oh, as to that:—At the same time, dad, you aren't giving Nina a fair chance to manifest her own will."

"Good Lord, I give Nina perfect freedom to do what she pleases."

"Dad, that's your trick to escape a responsibility for her. Own up, now, it is. Not that I blame you;

I'd probably do the same thing myself. At the same time—Now my advice to you about Nina is——”

Gresham picked up a book, which happened to be one of those post war novels which were disturbing the popular conscience just then.

“Read this?” he asked.

Wally took charge of that subject at once. “Yes, good thing; been censored here of course. Funny, isn't it, the way the mob protects its sadistic impulses. The killers are frightened that they won't have a good supply of corpses for the next war. Obvious why all these attacks on war are coming out now eighteen years after the war; the writers are getting on into the forties; disgust for life is setting in. It has taken them as horror of the individual act of killing as distinct from collective blood lust. . . .”

Gresham thought, “He thinks well, this lad; I suppose that's why he's in such an infernal muddle about himself. . . .”

But talk with Wally never got far from the hero motive of autobiography.

“. . . Of course, I understand perfectly why I've funk'd the constructive problem of work up to this; I've used booze to defeat a knowledge of self frustration. Booze gives the illusion of intellectual adventure without having to work for it. But that's done with; I intend to work now; finish that novel. I've got another good notion, too; a series of essays justifying human imbecility as the essential attack on all serious values. Justify! that's the trick for destroying a thing. And there's a chap I know wants me to start a private press with him; editions de luxe. . . . And I'll take a newspaper job, just to keep going. Get married, of course; it's the only life. Take a cottage

in the country. God! what happiness; to be alone with Ida. I want the long quiet evenings, the intimate talk, the exquisite calm of just putting my head on her breast and listening to her dear little heart ticking away like a happy little clock. . . .”

Gresham was thinking, “Love clearly reduces Wally’s mentality to a degree below popular fiction. His style goes all to pieces.”

After one of those self revealing of Wally’s Gresham was always left slightly limp and vaguely annoyed with Wally for a reason that eluded investigation. Thinking of Wally as an intelligent young ass came nearest to defining a consciousness of self depreciation aroused by him. Wally, on the other hand, emerged from the seance with a warm regard for his father, not as the author of his ego, but as one made worthy by an exhibition of its profundity.

In that benign mood his tour of the home patronised its inmates even to an Olympian tolerance that arrived at Jerry’s room.

As usual when at home Jerry was detected in a cataleptic pose over his drawing board, and relaxed with embarrassment to find what august visitor this was who pushed in the defences of his door. But he was pleased too, so greatly he admired Wally.

“Well, young Jerry, how’s work going?”

“Oh, I dunno. These are a few—pretty rotten——”

He selected a bunch of drawings and waited apprehensively for destructive criticism. But Wally was urbane, and did not destroy.

“Not so bad; you’re improving. Technique’s in a hell of a muddle; overloaded to blazes. Pity you don’t draw more from life. Your women are pretty

bum;—still, there's a flair somewhere in them for the feminine. On the whole you're improving. Let's see the last novel."

Wally, an Olympian beyond the good and evil of mere insult in the home, had been asked for an opinion on those works before. One was produced now, with writhings of alarm as he skimmed a page or two, read a paragraph or two, and tossed it back.

"Pretty bloody awful; don't think you'll ever learn to write. Why try to? It's not your job."

"Oh well, it gives a chap ideas to illustrate and all that."

"Oh, no harm in scribbling, of course, but you'll never get anywhere with this conscious literary drivel. Why not keep a diary. Give yourself a limit of eight words to a sentence and never state anything but direct facts."

But Jerry needed words to escape from facts, and compensate thereby for their frustrations in life. He shuffled literature aside and produced some hard metallic drawings of jam tins and bottles and motor cars.

"D'you think I'd have any chance doing trade work?" he asked.

"Trade work?"

Wally's tolerance hardly stretched to a subject like that, but he glanced at the degraded things.

"They're all right, I suppose; look as if they were turned out by machinery. What did you do them for?"

"Well—I thought—you might show them to one of those chaps who get advertisements for papers. In case I needed a job."

"A job? What the devil do you want a job for?"

"Well, a man never knows when he might want a job."

"All right, remind me to take them when I'm going. No, give them to the old man; I'll get them at the office."

He strolled off, leaving behind him a meekly encouraged but depreciated ego. The awful non existence of a future consummated a vague despair in Jerry by the conviction that he never could achieve Wally's magnificent assurance in the madhouse muddle of life and work, Wally knew all about life, all about work, all about girls. . . .

But by evening Wally had used up tolerance for the home and was getting bored with it. Not enough talk there. In the home there are too many blank interludes where people go about their own small affairs, or exchange trivialities about trivialities, forgetting that words exist only to concrete life as an autobiographical reality.

Moreover, he discovered at the table that a certain reticence was being practised between his parents. His father's urbanity had an edge on it and his mother was too unaware of his father. Nina tried to start a row with her father about the two seater, which she said had stuck her up that afternoon and had to be towed to the garage, and she called over its defects as criticism obviously ejected at a mean parent, who testily refused to be substituted for an absurd machine.

"You'll have to put up with it. I've told you I'm stuck for money at present."

"What about the Century Theatre?" asked Wally, staring. "You must have made a good thing out of that."

Gresham nearly got very angry. "Not at all; an

infernal cheese-paring job. And besides, with the depression this country is under it is impossible to take risks. . . .”

He generalised financial depression for use in the home circle and escaped from it to his room, from which he also ejected Wally by saying “Sorry, Wally, but I can’t talk at present; I’ve a number of letters to write. . . .”

In the front room, with nothing else to do, Wally began sorting gramophone records, disgusted at having to root through piles of jazz. Gresham had given up listening to good music; it set up an impatience at the back of his mind that he refused to analyse. As for Wally, he tolerated only the Russians at present.

He found some records from Prince Igor and put one on the machine, standing darkly over it, lest sounds should escape detection by the modern idiom of prose.

Nina came in with a piece of embroidery and plumped into a chair with it, to stitch intently. She was a spasmodic needlewoman, beginning elaborate works and never finishing them. This was to be a silk embroidered coat.

“Marvellous!” said Wally, as the music finished, “Pure debauch; you can hear the screams of the women being ravished.”

“Ghastly rot,” commented Nina briefly.

“That’s appreciation,—from you,” said Wally. He paused with a fresh record adjusted to ask,

“What’s the meaning of this talk of the old man’s about being hard up.”

“It’s only a rotten excuse not to give us a new car.”

“He can’t be hard up; he and Bill Floyd are chock a block with work. It’s a poor mouth trick. And just when I was going to ask him—”

He put that off to ask suspiciously, "What's the matter between him and mum?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"He's got a shirty look about him lately; I've noticed that."

"The truth is he wants to go gay and can't manage the silly business."

"O ho! is that it. He was with a girl on the boat tonight; gave her a lift to Ridge Street."

Nina was instantly enraged. "What sort of girl?"

"Oh, average idiot. Big sleepy eyed good enough looking wench."

"If that isn't disgusting. At his age——"

"Oh, I don't see why he shouldn't have a bit of a flutter; no harm in that."

Wally's tolerance passed that to lift the gramophone lever, but paused again, listening at the garden.

"Who's out there?"

"Oh, Jim and mum, I suppose."

"Jim Guthrie?"

"Yes."

Wally put the lever back and went to the open glassed doors. His mother and Jim were strolling the front garden path with the mechanical movements of people intent on other preoccupations. They did not appear to have much to say to each other, but at each turn they paused to murmur a few words and stroll back again. Wally studied them for a couple of turns and called abruptly. "Come in and have some music."

They came obediently, blinking a little in the light. Jim's simple stare discovered Wally, but failed to account for him.

"Didn't know you were home, Wally."

"I'm not, Jim; just a week end call——"

He eyed them till they were seated, his mother on the couch and Jim on its arm, and poised the needle.

"Listen to this; you people are becoming morally undone by too much jazz," he said, and set the record going. Baby uttered a faintly distressed sound, Jim listened with astonishment to peculiar noises, Nina stitched with vigour, indignant over that revelation of loose conduct in a father. Wally stood at the gramophone, sponsoring a rare work issuing from it. As a tribute to its virtue of noise, Baby said to Jim,

"I don't see what you gain by going away, Jim; life goes on just the same wherever you are."

"You think that because you live a perfect life, Honey."

"You think so, do you, Jim?"

"Of course. I go away from here as depressed as hell when I think of what a silly muddle my own life is, and how perfect it could be with a woman like you to take charge of it."

"You are very young, Jim."

"I'm thirty five."

"No, I mean that you still think life is a wonderful thing for other people and only a dull thing for yourself. Everybody thinks that, Jim."

"Life couldn't help being wonderful with you, Honey."

An innocent. But they know the only things worth saying to a woman, these innocents. Wally's scowl failed to repress murmurs intruded on the uproar of a Tartar debauch; Baby's face was tilted up; Jim's turned down over it . . .

Wally made a snatch at the gramophone arm but arrested that to stride across and bump down on the couch between Jim and his mother.

"Stop your dam' gabbling; it's an insult to Borodin."

"Wally, you perfect idiot, get up."

Wally glared at his mother, refusing to move. She tugged her dress from under him and rose, saying, "Your music is a nuisance, Wally, and your clothes smell of public houses."

That left Jim stranded in an intimate pose with Wally and not knowing what to do about it. But the record ended there and he was able to escape by getting up to turn off the machine. From that he crossed to Nina and picked up the end of her needlework.

"That's pretty, Nina. What's it to be?"

"A coat, if it has any luck, Jim."

She stitched complacently, forgetting a father in an absurd antic by a brother, which amused her greatly. Wally had always been like that at any male approach to his mother. Apparently he still entertained these childish exhibitions of jealousy. . . .

Baby went to the door, but paused there to say "I forgot to ask if you'd like a drink, Jim."

"Thanks," said Jim, and went to the side table for it.

"I haven't decided about that local dance, Jim, but I'll let you know."

"Right you are; anything suits me——"

He nipped off a 'Honey' just in time. Baby nodded goodby and went out. Wally thrust another record on the gramophone, making a good deal of noise about it. Jim returned to the arm of Nina's chair with his glass, politely enduring that record. When it was over he found he had to go. Nina followed him to the door, saying

"Did you find out what was wrong with that rotten car, Jim?"

"Yes, it's only a broken Bendix spring. You can have it tomorrow morning. . . ."

Wally had had enough of home. He strode out for his hat, but paused at the door of his father's room, embarrassed by a reluctance to enter that had nothing to do with borrowing a fare back to town. "It's Saturday; I'll go down to Bill Floyd's camp and get it from him," he muttered.

Nina had strolled to the gate of the drive with Jim, and Wally passed them with a brief goodnight, dismissing them with the banalities of home.

"Queer fellow, Wally; I suppose we ought to have listened to that music of his." said Jim. He put an arm round Nina and kissed her, saying absently, "Good night, Honey."

Nina's lips were cool and firm and not at all interested in kisses.

"Don't forget to have the car ready by ten, Jim."

Jim kissed her again, but she pushed him off.

"Don't be sloppy, Jim; go and practise on mama."

CHAPTER TEN

FLOYD'S camp at Colleroy was only a big square fibro barn with no graces and very little comfort. Some rough shelves for pots and crockery, a gas stove, rolls of bedding and blankets with wire stretchers stacked in one corner, to be set up as friends might choose to sleep there. But there was a gramophone on a deal box jumbled with records, and another box was nobly stored with bottles.

Wally had enough money for the bus fare to Colleroy, but he had the tramp from Key Heights to catch it, and the tramp up to Floyd's camp after leaving it. That was bad enough, but half way up the steep climb he heard Captain Gruntle exploding away at the top of it, and that was an outrage.

The garage doors of the camp were wide open and Floyd and Captain Gruntle were seated on deck chairs with a little table for glasses and a bottle between them. Uncle Buncle the bull terrier, responsible for everything, hurried out from under Floyd's chair to inquire into Wally's credentials for being on that holy spot, but retired again on diagnosing a known smell.

"Thought I'd find you alone, Bill," said Wally, scowling at Captain Gruntle.

"Whelp," said Captain Gruntle at nobody.

They hated each other.

"Have a drink," said Floyd, pleased to encourage discourtesies between those two. Wally poured a whisky and soda and pulled a deck chair to Floyd's

other side. Captain Gruntle went on talking as if Wally was not there.

"Beach pyjamas, by Gad. Damned excuse to ram an outsized backside into a pair of skin tight silk pants and waggle it at the public. In my time, by God, a woman wouldn't do that in her own bedroom. And button up flaps, by George. I saw one trollop with a single button to her bags. And shorts, by Ginger. They wear 'em loose enough to fall through them. And a loose legged slut inside 'em. I give you my word I had the glass trained on the cliff today from two fifteen to five forty, and by Thunder——"

The trenchant effect of these strictures on the beach feminine is not reproduced here, because Captain Gruntle was a boiled faced tight bellied little man with a mortally affronted eye, and he was corked up with a bulldog pipe, behind which he spluttered and fizzed like an exploding beer bottle. When specially roused he spat in your eye. At a forensic crisis he leaped up and dug madly at his trowser pockets as if suddenly attacked by crablice.

". . . and by Thunder, I counted twenty seven couples. And every one of 'em went to earth like jack rabbits. Not so much as a blink of bare leg on a hillside as bare as a monkey's breech."

"You ought to have been crawling round the cliff on your belly like the other touts," said Wally morosely.

"Wad d'yer mean! Sociological investigation statistics immorality," roared Captain Gruntle. "I'd have the strumpets out of their burrows with a dog whip, by Gad. Damme, a man only wants to go on the beach to see what goes on off it. With half a hint the trolloping sluts would have every stitch off and sun bake in their pelts."

“So they would, the little darlings. And the filthy aldermen who stop them doing it ought to be boiled in the grease of their own concupiscence.”

Captain Gruntle’s beer gas nearly blew his cork out.

“Whack ’em, lash ’em, tan ’em black instead of brown,” he bellowed. “Slack backed bitches with their clothes off and a ninety per cent draper’s profit with ’em on. If I had my way I’d pass a law making ’em dress in bran sacks, by Thunder.”

“By Thunder, you would. And by Thunder the little darlings would chase you into a water closet and pull the chain on you.”

Sociological opinion between Wally and Captain Gruntle had now reached its correct pitch of mutual execration, and the neighbourhood was aware of it. Sometimes they shouted solo and sometimes in duet. On two subjects Captain Gruntle’s need to denounce offenses achieved frenzy. One was Women and the other Working Men. Captain Gruntle wanted to beat women with dogwhips but he wanted to do fearful things to working men, such as shooting them like mad dogs and lashing union officials to death and bombing the Trades Hall and mowing its denizens down with machine guns. Wally cared about as much for working men’s politics as he did for tribal policies on the Limpopo River, but he fermented himself like a labour agitator to belabour Captain Gruntle with them. He was so terribly in earnest that he exasperated himself almost as much as Captain Gruntle, and he was a trained shouter too, as all who contend with the liberated ego of booze must be.

“. . . Why shouldn’t the greasy Babbitts have their throats slit,” he yelled. “I hope the mob rises and hunts them down like dingos. Blood lust’s their creed;

give them a dose of it. They howl like mad dogs for blood when it's a question of sending youth out to fight for them; good enough for the swine if they were run down a chute and guillotined like pigs at Chicago. . . ."

Floyd enjoyed this. His grin widened an inch and he contributed to frenzy by pushing the whisky. Apart from Captain Gruntle's beer gas explosions and crablice boundings Floyd enjoyed Wally's unconscious pose of being the dupe of whatever imbecility he chose to vociferate. It was the novelist's trick of extracting the essence of a character by going one better than it as a literary buffoon, and Captain Gruntle endured having his personality distended as a character in fiction just as far as a balloon will stand having gas pumped into it without bursting. At the point of being about to burst he leaped out of his chair and ran out of the camp, but they could hear him for quite a while snorting and sputtering and back firing into space.

"Why the blazes do you have that awful old bastard round here for," demanded Wally, outraged.

"Fine trenchant fellow."

"He's a pre-Freudian exhibit in frustrated sadism."

"No, no, he's got a wife three times as big as himself with a little black moustache and she smells of mothballs."

"Serve the old cow right."

Wally collapsed into his chair to say "I'm bloody well sick of everything," but suddenly remembered that he was not, and shot up again with a flashing profile and a transfigured eye.

"Bill, I'm in love. No, don't mistake this; I'm not talking about a fornicating partner. I've touched the great secret; something we try *not* to get from women, —peace. . . ."

When Wally wrote about love, peace was a blessing never vouchsafed his lovers, who were put through the disruptions proper to their unhappy state by a sardonic idiom that did not know such a word existed. Therefore Wally's style as a lover must be accounted a precaution that got rid of material he had no use for as a novelist. But Floyd enjoyed it; he specialised in third rate art.

" . . . The point about all this, Bill, is that I'm going to chuck booze and work like hell. Here's where I want your help; no, not cash, but moral support. The old man ought to stake me in a review; won't cost more than fifteen hundred or say two thousand at most. I want you to put this to the old man. Put it strongly; urgent need to centralize opinion in a strong monthly. Make it an absolutely ruthless analysis of the state of things here and put the morons responsible for it on the operating table. Ought to pay like hell. Now, can I count on you to put the case strongly to the old man?"

"Yes, Wally, count on me for that."

"Good old Bill. We'll turn out a slashing review. Of course I'll write most of the stuff myself; I'm chock a block with good ideas. . . ."

On fire with a theme more inspiring than love, Wally blazed finely with it. He strode buoyantly about, or stood over Floyd for emphasis, smoked incessant cigarettes and dashed off a whisky whenever he thought of it, outlining the while a review that would at least concrete public opinion on the necessity of murdering its editor. Pleased with an illusion of enterprise, he paused once to approve of its stage setting.

"Good place this, Bill; plenty of space to think in.

Good place for a party, too. That reminds me, I must bring Ida down here. I want you to meet her, Bill."

"Yes, yes. You might give me warning at the office first."

"Right, Bill. I'll get a few of the chaps interested in the review to come too. We'll talk it over. May as well bring a few girls to round off the evening."

Floyd scratched his grin, not quite so pleased with Wally, who emanated approval of Floyd.

"Yes, I'll build a place like this when I'm married. Marriage, Bill, is the only life. Wonder to me, Bill, you never got married. Think of having a glorious little girl in charge of this place, for instance. Think of waking up in the dawn, Bill, to discover her dear little face on the pillow beside you; to watch the first tender fluttering of her eyelids; the lax happy smile at another perfect day beginning——"

"Yes, yes, Wally, I'll think of it. But don't forget, you know; fair warning before you bring any of your tarts down here."

"Right, Bill. And you'll pitch it in hot to the old man about the review. You'll know what to say; I've gone over most of the essential points. . . ."

Wally stayed at the camp that night and Floyd got a certain amount of sleep. . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FLOYD arrived at the office precisely at nine, looked through his mail, filled his pipe, and went straight on with the scale plan pinned to his drawing desk at the point where he had left it last night. An untidy man externally, his daily routine moved with the uninspired regularity of a parasite on clocks, which were invented to defeat the irresponsible attack of life. Repeating formulas on paper allowed him to dispense with thought on their account, and free speculation on the absurd spectacle of humanity, which was a harlequinade clearly designed for a wise man's entertainment. Betimes he looked up to scratch his grin, confirm an amusing instance, and go on working refreshed by it. Something snug and smug in this secret communion over a process by one safe from it.

Gresham arrived at ten, taking the office by a hasty assault of nerves, and went through his mail with little testy sounds, which had less to do with the mail than the procedure involved by it. Floyd paused to mark these signals of discontent, and put down his pencil to introduce a slight item in their service.

"Been having a serious talk with Wally about his future," he said, coming into Gresham's room. "He's making a fresh start in life, y' know."

"Yes, I know; this is the fifth."

"Yes. The special point about this one is that a monthly review is urgently needed here. He wants a couple of thousand from you to start it."

"Oh! I thought there was something he didn't say to me on Saturday. A review, eh? Yes, I know those urgently needed reviews that start with a bang and go out with a fizzle."

He pitched down the letter he was holding and exuded a breath of satiated tolerance.

"It's too damned easy, Bill, the stale old trick of getting rid of a parent by chucking his money away. Well, he won't get it, that's all. He'll have to satisfy himself by calling me a dirty dog for not giving it. And now I'll have the rotten job of talking myself out of this preposterous piece of magnanimity on his part. Has he been in yet?"

"No, you are safe for the moment; I paid him his two quid yesterday. He seemed to think you'd like time to consider the obvious necessity of a strong critical monthly."

"Did he? And what the hell are you grinning at? It's not funny. And there's nothing to be conceited about over a primal urge of funk that allowed you to escape getting married."

Floyd retired to his room, pleased at a compliment to his superior cunning, and listening to Gresham fuming about, and making the most of an excuse that refused to let him settle down to work.

Excuses were really not needed; the worst attack of any general state of irritation is its refusal to arrive at crisis. In that state there is nothing to do but go on doing nothing, which amounts to doing anything. There was a recast sketch plan for the Pyle Buildings on his table, but he left that to go out and fuss over minor matters at the Century Theatre. . . .

At five o'clock he arrived at the North Shore Wharf and there lurked, watching all arrivals at it. He was

taking no chances on the margin of Mildred's daily return from those mysteriously regular window shopping trips. Three quarters of an hour was his vigil before he saw her crossing the Quay with her short sighted vague air at the traffic, and her attractive mincing waddle of the hips. She only lifted her eyelids a moment at seeing him there, and let him steer her onto the wharf by a docile elbow. There Gresham dispensed with preludes to intimacy by saying intimately, "Listen, Mildred, will you be a kind girl and do me a good turn. Come and have dinner with me tonight. Can you manage it?"

"If you like."

"Good. You won't need to go home and change, will you? You look charming in that dress."

"Do I?" She meditated a moment before adding, "It would mean going to Ridge Street."

"Yes, why bother. Let us go across and get the car and drive round by the Lane Cove Bridge into town. That will give us a pleasant run before dinner."

"Very well."

A vast relief to Gresham. He placed on this little adventure a conviction that life must be damned or saved by it.

He talked brightly to her all the way across the harbour, and put her in the car with a pleasing sense of being in legal possession of her at last. A confusion, perhaps, that transferred negation in her to an assurance of enterprise in himself. He was half way to Lane Cove before he discovered that her slowed down air did not really demand entertainment. Perhaps bright talk did not entertain it. Talk meant pumping things into her and getting nothing out. But he did not care; she was a girl, and no girl with reasonable

good looks could be a fool at his age. Nevertheless, by a discovery that enterprise did not matter, enterprise began to flag a little.

He parked the car in Martin Place and they walked on to the Ambassadors. Gresham was known to all Sydney's head waiters, and was served with the distinction of those whom head waiters permit themselves to know. He was glad of the little pomposities that saw them seated at a selected table, and the consultation over the wine list as over a sacred ordinance, which a wine list really is. He was glad of anything that mitigated his treacherous doubts about a bright event.

Its ritual was rather left to Gresham and the waiter. Mildred failed to play up to them. She did not, the moment the waiter had done his turn do hers by turning on Gresham a face bright with expectation, and let loose on him a stream of chatter that would endure the whole course of dinner, and be aware of no one in the room but him. Other girls were doing it all over the place, exalting their men as brilliant fellows buying expensive food for girls.

Mildred's slow glance passed over them as a species unknown to her. She ate a large dinner in a nice precise way, and drank whatever was placed in her glass. It failed in any way to affect her indestructible poise, which it should have done; Gresham was calculating at least on that.

As he had to talk, he told her things about the Ambassadors; of its financial vicissitudes, its jazz band, the construction of its dance floor. He told her things about himself, too, implying the magnitude of his affairs and his great need for relaxation from them. By that time he had quite got rid of the need for subtilities

in self revelation, and had fallen to the crudely sentimental.

“. . . The fact is, Mildred, there's a general assumption that a man of my age—By the way, how old do you think I am?”

She pondered that as if it was a sum. “Forty,” she said, having worked it out.

“Pretty close,” said Gresham, pleased. She really could not be accused of the brain storm necessary to a piece of duplicity here. . . . “Well, this silly notion that a man of forty doesn't need relaxation;—I mean the sort of relaxation he can only get from a sympathetic woman,—a girl. And after all, Mildred, a man of my age can be a dashed sight better friend to a girl than the average youth. You feel that, don't you?”

“Oh yes, I often feel that.”

“Of course, Mildred, I don't mean to imply that the friendship of a man of my—a man of forty implies any responsibility from a girl of twenty, but all the same, I'd like to think you enjoyed coming out with me occasionally, even if it's only for a drive or a dinner or—You understand, don't you?”

“I think it would be very nice.”

She agreed to anything. Gresham put enterprise aside with the coffee and said, “Let's have a dance.”

Other couples were parading the floor, and she rose reluctantly.

“I don't dance much,” she said.

She did not dance well, either. Its rhythm was not in her. She moved her long legs stiffly, as if afraid of falling down, and the charm of clasping her body was quite lost in the awkward job of steering it safely among the dance couples. Her face lost its immobility to take on a vaguely stressed air, which lost Gresham

his assurance that she liked being clasped by him. He got her through that dance and steered her back to the table, saying mentally, "That's off, anyhow. . . ."

Discouraged, and meditating retreat, he ordered drinks and lit a cigarette, offering one to Mildred, which she took. The hand that held it to his match was large and soft, smoothly finished without distinction. It told lies about her, too, for its first finger was strongly marked with needle pricks.

Gresham studied her, depressed by the heresy that a pretty girl can emanate a physical mystery without being mysterious. Her long, white, perfectly round throat showed only a dimple to mark the division of her collar bone, and that was mysterious. Her broad shoulders and thighs were mysterious because of her slim waist. Her heavy eyelids were mysterious, drooped over the hidden fantasies of her body. Calling a girl with those assets stupid did not explain her. Stupidity can have secrets to reveal. . . .

Gresham forced a lively air and said, "I've been doing all the talking tonight, Mildred; now it's your turn. Tell me something about yourself."

"About what?"

"Oh, anything. Your home, for instance——"

"Oh, that——"

But it seemed to give her a theme. She turned her half glance at Gresham and pitched her voice carefully, as if it might go wrong.

"You see, we live a very retired life at home. Mother——"

The theme appeared to go wrong there. She re-adjusted it with a faintly enlivened inflection, as having got it right this time.

"You see, father was considered to have married be-

neath him. Not that he did, really, for mother's people are quite good people. I mean, surveyers, and all that. But father's people,—you see, he was an Englishman of quite good family; I mean, titled people, you know, and *he* came to Australia. He quarrelled with his father, you see, and he did awfully well here, a squatter, and all that, and when he married my mother—a love match it was—*his* people refused to recognise her, and cut off his income. I mean, that was after he lost his station, frightfully rich he was then, and lost everything, and then *his* father died and he could have inherited the title, but he insisted that *his* people should recognise my mother, but *they* . . .”

Gresham's ears failed to function, mesmerised to inattention by a narrative that wandered in a limbo of third rate fiction. He kept nodding mechanically, watching the dancers, and other girls. . . .

At a purely arbitrary point of Mildred's life story he said, “Well well, that's very interesting, Mildred. Now what about getting the car and going for a run.”

He rose, and Mildred obediently stopped talking and rose too. She did not even go through an ordained ritual of taking a little mirror from her hand bag and achieving a moment's intense abstraction by passionately powdering her nose, but followed Gresham passively out of the restaurant.

That run in the car took them back precisely by the road they had come, and disposed of any further need for enterprise. On a clear road Gresham took her in his free arm to draw her face round and kiss it. Her face came round because he pulled it round, and it stayed round till he stopped kissing it, and then went back to its original position. Her skin was very soft

and sweet but her lips were quite expressionless and did not seem to know they were being kissed. . . .

Well, it kept the decencies in countenance, at least, though with those splendid shoulders under his arm and his hand smoothing her long throat it was stark idiocy to pretend that his spirit was as flat as a pancake.

A ghastly thought hit him, "It must be me, not her. . . ."

At Ridge Street he turned into the curb and pulled up. There were few people about, but he took the excuse of publicity to give her a brief kiss and a pat on the shoulder, which resigned her, or himself.

"It was nice of you to come out with me, Mildred. Thanks very much."

"Thanks,—it was nice."

She opened the door and stepped down, and Gresham was attacked by compunction, mainly for himself, though he mistook it for a service to her. He took her hand and pressed it, trying to press a response from its soft laxness.

"I wish I thought you enjoyed going out with me, Mildred—I don't believe you do."

She had a brief contest with her eyelids, to raise them with a vague effect of discovering him.

"I think you are very nice," she said.

It was a statement, not an endearment, but it almost warmed Gresham, and he pulled her over to kiss him. She held her lips for him to kiss.

"We'll arrange another night out soon, Mildred. But I can always see you on the boat. . . ."

She nodded and stood back and he started the car.

For an interval he drove with a set face. This event which was to damn life or save it! "You *would* have it," he hissed.

His driving said anything that need be said about an intellectual hedonist of fifty who has forced assurance on the good taste that rejects a middle aged carcass as a vehicle for the passions. He took corners without precaution and missed mudguards with vicious precision. The hairpin bends up from the Spit Bridge jerked execrations from cars descending. Suicide of an aspiration. . . .

But on the heights that gave a straight run to Manly a defense against depression collapsed, and he drove slowly, which showed that he had arrived at the base resort of resignation.

“What does it matter, anyway? Even a bright girl would have pumped me as flat as this. Mildred’s all right; just the sort of idiot I need. If I was twenty she’d be anything I wanted her to be. Oh, well, let it go——”

It refused to do. That which remained was the prime fatuity of proving a thing that must not be known. This event did not squash an adventure in love, but the hope of one.

Manly was alive and busy with the last preparations for the yearly Surf Carnival. Booths were up on the Corso and roundabouts on the Ocean Beach. Gresham drove morosely past them. Carnival!

CHAPTER TWELVE

CARNIVAL is for those worthy of it.

Jerry Gresham stood at the Potts gate and whistled seductively, invitingly, urgently. He had come by appointment to take Mazie Potts to the Manly Carnival, and he had a lace edged handkerchief and a box of chocolates as tribute to her, and he whistled and whistled and nothing happened. Old Potts was out, Bungo Potts was out, Mazie Potts was in. That was the baffling thing. She came several times to the parlor window and looked at Jerry as if it was a matter of indifference to her whether he was, or was not, a stray mongrel, and Jerry's signals assuring her that he was not a stray mongrel extracted no blink of opinion from her hard policeman's eye. She only looked at him briefly and went away again.

Jerry could not understand this at all. Some deep policy of defeating detection in the home must be at work here, and he continued to whistle and wait and keep an alert eye on the Potts front door. But when that opened at last it was not Mazie, but Edie Potts who came out, hatted and toiletted for Carnival.

"What's up with young Mazie not coming out?" he asked, astonished.

Edie was one of those kind brown girls with a confidential manner acquired by whispering secrets behind old Potts' back, and she now confided one to Jerry.

"Mazie isn't coming out at all," she said.

"Why?"

Edie dropped her voice, as imparting the essence of this secret. "One reason is that she isn't going with you any more, but the real reason is she's going with Mick Stimson."

Jerry was as confounded at this piece of news as if an unprecedented exposure of duplicity had burst on the perfect nature of his relations with Mazie Potts.

"So if I was you I wouldn't wait for her any longer," said Edie comfortably.

Jerry said a fearful thing. It arose from the bottomless pit into which faith in girls was gone for ever.

"So much for the faithfulness of women," he said.

"Yes," agreed Edie, "So if you're going my way, Jerry, I'm going to Puncheons."

As all roads led to the bottomless pit, Jerry might as well go to Puncheon's too, and turned to walk with Edie. She was twenty-two and therefor imposed no awful exercise of lover on going about the earth's surface with her. And as that disgraced tribute to Mazie had to be got rid of somehow, Jerry lugged it out and handed it to Edie, rather with the air of disposing of a trifle before saying farewell to life.

"I was going to give these to Mazie, but *blow* her," he said.

Edie took them with little cries of pleasure. That kind manner of hers masked the central motive of her being, which was to extract presents from men. Charmed at a reward for piracy without its exertions, she took Jerry's arm.

"That's real nice of you, Jerry; the very thing I wanted for the Carnival, and if there's one thing I like its real lace on a handkerchief, and as for young Mazie if I told you the things that girl has said about you you'd know that girl's true nature, and I suppose your

mother's got heaps of lovely linen and if there's one thing I like . . ."

This kind Edie Potts revived whatever remnants of self respect remained to Jerry from a life ruined by Mazie Potts, and he said he would get her a few heaps of nice linen, and Edie held his arm with such marked kindness that he arrived at Puncheon's feeling that there might be one or two girls left on earth not altogether base.

But Herb was there to demolish these weak concessions to the evil angels of man's peace and pockets. The spirit of Carnival had so far penetrated inland as to cause a hell of a row between Herb and Dan over who was to drive the Ford car into Manly that night, which Herb was refusing to do for stated reasons.

"Drive the bloody wimmin in yourself," he bel-
lowed. "I've had enough of bein' made their flamin'
cats paw. I'm going in on me own in the flamin'
jinker."

"Want me to put a head on you," roared Dan.
"Told you expressly last week I'm drivin' Annie
Tricket over in the jinker."

"Tell you expressly this minute I'm havin' the
jinker."

"You put a finger on that goddam' jinker."

"All I ask you goddam' harness up that jinker——"

Dan obliged him on the spot by leaping at the jinker and tearing it from its moorings with the action of a highspirited quadruped. As further marking resolution by action he galloped into the stable and would have galloped out again, save that he was festooned in harness and lugging forth a horse, which he harnessed to the jinker with lightning speed in silence, lest speech be forced from him and murder follow.

Herb confessed that this was no more than a passing exchange of opinion between brothers by saying to Jerry, "Gets your goat, don't it, the way these flamin' wimmin think a man's practically under an obligation to cart them about——"

Angel Puncheon came to the verandah, and Edie dived for her whispering secrets, which Angel transferred to Herb by saying, "We've got to be there at a quarter to eight, Herb," and which Herb passed on to Jerry by asking, "Does that get your goat or does it not?" and though it did not really get Jerry's goat, he nodded cynically back at Herb, as one who also had dark knowledge of the female heart.

They loitered to the orchard fence for a private indulgence in misanthropy. Edie went into the house with Angel and a moment later Ed burst out of it and slunk his carthorse carcase into the stable yard, where he leaned suddenly on the fence and looked at the brown mare, as if he had come by appointment to do that very thing. With a danger germ like Edie Potts in the house he required a sanitary sanctuary such as the stable at hand. The day being also a holiday, he wore his dungarees and working boots, as disinfectants against infection by festival.

Thus Bill Purfroy, riding past, observed Ed looking at a horse and at once pulled up at the outer fence to have a look too. He looked for ten minutes and produced disparagement thereby engendered within him.

"Don't like the way she eases that off hind foot."

Ed did a little minor exploding, not too loud. "Nothin' but a stone bruise; pulled stone out meself s'mornin'——"

"Maybe. Same time, I've seen her stand that way before."

"Hock's clean as a whistle. Known that mare do forty mile an' come back on her toes."

"Yes,—perhaps. Same time, she's a bit flat in the bone. Not that I'm agen flat bones, but my experience is a horse round in the bone stands up to work better."

"Work! Just have a look at that mare's shoulders and tell me——"

But there Ed bolted straight into the stable because Edie Potts had come to the side verandah, and was calling in most lascivious tones, "Tea-e-e, Ed, Tea-e-e-e, Bill!"

With an air of not much caring whether he did, or did not, have a cup of this syren's tea, Bill hung up his horse and came to the verandah with his loose legged straddling lurch. Angel was at the tea tray, and gave Bill her remote friendly smile, which Bill returned with his automatic "Day, Ange, day, Ede," while lowering his massive limbs into a deck chair. In cords and leggings, and white soft shirt open at the neck, his crisp black hair and arms of smooth bronze gave the girls a fine coloured lump of man to gaze at. Angel probably saw him half a mile away, if her shallow eyes saw him at all. It was Edie who got him his tea and passed the cake and sidled at him like a cat about to rub her fur smooth.

"Everybody tells me you're a lucky man, Bill."

"Me, Ede? Well, I dunno——"

"I mean winning that prize in Tatts, and that."

"Well, I got a horse for a place; twenty five quid."

"Well, I never have any luck and I simply must have a ticket in that Art Union for a motor car, and what I was thinking, Bill, [Edie whispered this, as a secret] if you bought me a ticket I'd have luck and of course I'd pay you afterwards."

"That's all right, Ede, I'll take a chance for you."

"That's real nice of you, Bill."

Angel brought her gaze back from nowhere to discover Bill and say, "Shall we see you at the Carnival tonight, Bill?"

"Me, Ange. Well, I was half thinkin' of goin'."

"Of course you're going, Bill.—" Edie made a lightning calculation to add, "And you be at the bandstand at half past nine because there's something I want your opinion about."

Herb couldn't stand any more of this. He and Jerry had come to the verandah for tea, and having had it, Herb nodded Jerry away from disgraces being pirated on a fellow man. "Don't that get you?" he said, "She'll ask his opinion all right about takin' a chance for her on every flamin' fake in the place. Well, I've come to a decision; I'm off wimmen for good and I ain't going to drive those two into Manly tonight."

With which trenchant rejection of servitude Herb doubtless sufficed himself, for he drove those two into Manly as required, Jerry going with them seated in front with Herb, and making male sounds to Herb's mutterings at Edie's bright secret mongering going on behind them.

But the roads were cluttered with cars driving to Carnival and Herb was kept too busy with his job to air its discontents, and Manly, all astir with bands and bright lights and brilliant costumes further bemused inquiry into the deficiencies of a life so profusely coloured. They parked the car in a side street and Edie let Herb into a secret by saying "If we miss you in the crowd, Herb, we'll meet you here at eleven," and went off into the crowded Corso with Angel.

Herb saw them go with dark suspicion. "Mark my

words, that Potts bitch has got a meet on and Angel's in it," he said.

"I don't know, Herb; Angel never seems to take the slightest interest in men."

"Well, I own Angel's a pure girl; a girl that wouldn't stand for any funny business; a girl——"

The fine crash of a band as it turned into the Corso restored Herb from these confessions of a brother's faith. "Here's the flamin' procession," he said. "Be-in' here, may as well have a look at it. But mark me, Jerry, NO FLAMIN' GIRLS."

"I tell you, Herb, after young Mazie Potts I never want to see another girl."

Nevertheless he saw, and marked with avid eye, girls and girls and girls. They were the prime motive of a cortege designed of whales, flower bowers, Gollywogs, sea serpents, and aeroplanes. Before it went giant masks, swaying their eighteen foot bodies with bland imbecility aloft while their little legs danced madly below. Then girls. Festoons of girls. Girls enthroned in allegory, minioned by sea nymphs, bathing beauties, costumed ladies, uncostumed minxes.

More band, more girls. A too great wealth of girls. All exquisite, all perched in the mountains of the moon. From the bottomless pit where all lyricists must dwell, Jerry gazed at girls in an ecstatic despair, fearful of missing a glimpse of lovely arm or breast or leg, catching it, missing it, losing it forever.

Life had no meaning, never to possess all those girls. . . .

The procession rumty-tummed off along the Ocean Beach, sucking the crowd in behind it, and setting Herb and Jerry adrift too, like a couple of stray corks. A bucolic and an isolate, neither had the gift of crowds.

They stood about and looked on at a spectacle but were not of it. The denizens of Carnival frolicked, throwing confetti and blowing squeakers and singing out things to girls. Those are the secrets of Carnival. On the Corso chocolate wheels span, goods were auctioned, bands played, couples danced. On the Ocean Beach systems of centrifugal momentum vended a grand illusion of speed and a queer sensation in the stomach by whirling it through the air in circles. Patrons of the great wheel went solemnly up into the night and solemnly came down again, to be lured thereafter into magic caverns where walls collapsed, floors undulated, and unseen forces tripped up their heels and cascaded a Walpurgis scramble of kicking girls' legs from darkness into light. It paid you to go through this ghastly experience early, otherwise you arrived behind the legs instead of being there to watch them arrive.

For the rest, those eternal diversions of the village fair, which attest an impregnable naivete in the human race that marvels may be seen for a small sum in a small tent. At intervals Herb adulterated scorn for life's rewards by saying tolerantly, "Oh well, bein' here we may as well do a bear up. What about puttin' the word on those two over there . . ."

Enterprise never got further than that. At the last moment Herb failed to put the word. Perhaps he forgot it. When he had sidled round the girls marked for capture, with Jerry in tow, he said to Jerry, "Not much class," and sidled off again. After such a truncated adventure Herb became very captious of the male promenaders, especially the well dressed ones, and jostled them truculently. "I'd like to see one of those cows plough a straight furrow," he sneered to Jerry. . . .

Jerry met known faces in the crowd, most of which he avoided. His mother was there, looking on from a car with Jim Guthrie. Nina passed with Drake, who beamed on a spectacle which reprieved a country of too many blank spaces. Jerry heard him say, "Good fun, Nina, but you can buy plenty of good fun in Europe. Isn't that part of any woman's bargain . . ."

Ronny reached over to jostle Nina there. He was patronising two costumes from the procession with a good deal of nice girl outside them and called to Nina, "I may let you see me later."

"Dangerous Ronny," jeered Nina.

"Is he, though?" asked Drake. "Just about how far dangerous, Nina. . . ."

All that was outside Jerry's world. One evil from it was there; Mazie Potts. Jerry sneered at her, Mazie couldn't even bother to see him. So passed Mazie Potts.

They saw much of Edie Potts, brown and bustling and busily whispering to a different youth each time. She dangled a hoard of chocolate boxes and other spoil, and she held the arm of whatever promenade pirate who had captured her in the kindest way. Angel appeared to have been left behind Edie's tour of Carnival's pockets. They saw her later, standing with Bill Purfroy. . . .

They stood; Bill bovine and Angel some sort of unknown girl beside him. Perhaps it was her eyes that kept her unknown; clear, calm and aloof, without any depth. They conveyed an impression that Angel was not quite alive.

Like two corks caught in a backwash, Herb and Jerry found themselves on the outskirts of Carnival and there met Bungo Potts.

This was counted a rare encounter by all, especially Bungo, who shook hands with maudlin fervour. He had drunk beer, and balanced dispeptically on the curb to spit in the gutter and say, "Ask what I thinker Carnivals. *That's* what I thinker Carnivals." It was now seen that Bungo was well in liquor. And that friends should participate in that generous state, he said. "What about a beero. Gotter coupler bottles left in Jimmy Mender's car."

In a side street they came to the car and climbed in to the back seat, where Bungo detached a stopper and the bottle passed. Herb took a long swig and exhaled misanthropy with, "That's the stuff and to hell with wimmen." Bungo qualified his swig with, "Gimme beer, but gimme girls too." Jerry did not take a swig, but pretended to. He was scared of beer, though earnestly hoping one day to acquire the art of easy boozing. So he exhaled largely and said, "No more girls for me. All they're good for is to play hell with a bloke's feelings."

"If a bloke lets them," corrected Herb. "Me, I send 'em to hell."

"Me, I fall for 'em," said Bungo. "Gotter own it. A bloke's weak. I'm weak. Own it. Girl puts it across me, I'm hers. Practically a woman's plaything."

"Trouble with you, Bungo, you can't leave women alone," said Jerry, professional liar to bucolics.

"I own it," said Bungo, boastfully humble. "Practically carried away by passion. It's a fault; granted. Once a girl's mine, I'm hers. Do what she likes with me."

"Not me," said Herb firmly. "I give 'em a square deal; that's all. If it's a fair dinkum go, I'm there to

pay a fair price for it. If not, get another mug. That's my way; walk off and leave them."

"Not mine," confessed Bungo mournfully. "Sixer seven girls; take the lot on. Once mine, I'm done. Slave to wimmen, practically."

"Your mistake, Bungo, is you idealize women."

"That's me, Jerry—hits me off. Queens, every one of 'em. You're mine. Right; walk on me. That's my style; slave to passion."

He became suddenly active, reaching for the door. "What's the idea sittin' here. Time to pick up a few tarts."

Herb hauled him back. "Not me; to hell with 'em."

"Well, sportin' offer. Say the word. Here's me; pick 'em up by dozens."

"Let the flamin' cows find another mug. I been through it. Brought down to bed rock, what's a woman's main proposition: get a mug to keep her. All very well, this love, but what's its price? Hard cash. Not for me, I'm set; got 'em all off by heart. Like to see the flamin' tart that can put it over me."

"Allright—open bottle," said Bungo, and did so.

Jerry took small sips of beer, and assumed a thrill of intoxication, which magnified a sense of the lost mystery of life. Beyond them at the street's end Carnival buzzed, and confetti fluttered about the arc lights like swarming moths. Life could never be really like that. . . .

Herb and Bungo maintained assertion on man's lot that must submit to woman or reject her utterly; a discourse punctuated by passing the bottle and by Bungo's proposals to descend in the character of a procurer, though he always allowed Herb to haul him back in time. It passed an interlude that allowed

Herb's rejection of women to recall a slight service to them still pending.

"Suppose we may as well pick those two up," he said.

Bungo at once got down with the trenchant air of a man who has trifled too long with a serious obligation. "Pick 'em up dozens," he said, and went straight off with a tilt from the upright, bearing terribly down on girls.

When Angel and Edie arrived at the car they had Bill Purfroy with them, and Edie was loaded like a pirate from a pillaged town. She dangled chocolate boxes, a clock, two fancy baskets, and three aluminium saucepans. Angel carried nothing, though Bill carried a box of chocolates for her.

The moon had risen and now hung over Manly like a late arrived carnival lantern. Angel stared idly at it while Edie stowed her plunder in the car and got in beside Herb, who lolled at the wheel, a sardonic male, only to be amused at the transparent wiles of these creatures called women.

Angel came back from the moon to discover Bill Purfroy and take the chocolates from him.

"You'll come back with us, Bill."

"Thanks, Angel, but I rode over."

Angel forgot him to discover Jerry modestly at hand and said pensively, "Then you can sit with me, Jerry."

Flattered and embarrassed, Jerry held the door for her and took the back seat too. Herb started the car. Bill said, "'Night, all." All said, "'Night Bill," and they were off along the Harboard Road, leaving a blur of light behind them to mark the last of Carnival.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ANGEL opened the box of chocolates on her lap and said absently "Help yourself, Jerry." Gingerly, lest he seem to intrude on the sacrosanct space of Angel's lap, Jerry helped himself to a chocolate. Herb, now tolerant of Edie as a detected pirate, said, "See you've had the mugs going tonight, Ede."

"What a thing to say, Herb; why, I won everything myself."

"Yes; whose money?"

"If you *are* with a boy, Herb, and he puts your money on for you, I ask you, Herb, can you force him to take your money if he won't, and I *do* think, Herb, it wasn't nice of you to dodge me the way you did tonight."

"Oh, I seen you comin'. I been there before."

"You've got a low opinion of girls, Herb."

"I got an opinion verified by the facts."

"Now don't be cynical, Herb, for the truth is, and I often say it, there isn't a more open handed boy in the district, and I tell you as a friend, Herb, that you're too free with your money and though no one likes a boy to be mean I do say, Herb, that you oughtn't to throw money about the way you do."

"Who, me? Well, I own that when I'm out for fun money's no object to me."

"Exactly, Herb, and though I like a boy to be generous in reason, I tell you as a friend, Herb. . . ."

The moon bowled along with them, keeping pace

with the Ford car. Jerry stared up at it, a little muzzy with beer and speed, wondering what it really was, putting that silly rot from telescopes aside. The stars frightened him, but he loved the moon. It was a good thing, too, that he did not have to talk to Angel, since there was nothing on earth he could think of to talk to her about. At intervals she took a chocolate out of the box with languid fingers and slowly absorbed it, lost in reverie till she remembered Jerry's existence by making a faint offer of the box at him. Jerry's fingers apologised for taking chocolates out of it, for even a layer of cardboard can let you know it has girl's legs under it. He had very sensitive hands, with quick nervous fingers.

Angel tired of chocolates and let the box slide to the floor. "Don't bother," she said, when Jerry would have picked it up. She settled herself at ease and instead of a chocolate, picked up Jerry's hand, as an idle thing to occupy her own with. Astonished, he left it limply in her possession, while without looking at it she trailed out the length of each finger, thinking of other things. Still in that lax lost mood she did an impossible thing; a thing that could not happen. She laid Jerry's hand against her throat and caressed it with her chin——

Jerry gave a startled glance at Herb; his first alarm of the senses rushed at that excuse. But Herb was busy being kindly talked to by Edie, even if his job of driver permitted looking round.

And Angel's act had to be accounted for somehow. . . .

Jerry himself accounted for it by slipping his arm round her waist. This might have been a sentient act but was not; Jerry was quite moonstruck just then.

Angel made nothing of it. Pensively, she turned and offered him her lips and Jerry kissed them.

He kissed them. He was drunk on happiness and amazement. He went on kissing and kissing and kissing Angel without being able to stop, even if such a madhouse proposal could have reached him. The only time he did stop was to cast a hurried glance at Herb before returning to breathe at Angel's scented lips. His restless fingers had found other marvels too, beside her lovely throat. . . .

By that time conceit nearly blew him out of the Ford car. He was speechless, but that was necessary, else must he have babbled aloud of a miracle and been murdered by Herb. But Herb was chuckling fatuously at the kind things Edie was saying about him, and he now drove with one hand while the other was round Edie, showing that a man replete with knowledge of these creatures may still condescend to a little light dalliance with them.

Past Dee Why and Narrabeen they sped and on by darker roads, but Jerry bowled through space on the hoop of the moon, kissing a moon goddess. She must have liked it, too, for she let herself be kissed all the way to Key Heights; fifteen miles of kiss. Moon-goddesses are like that. . . .

But at Potts dairy farm Jerry had to bump back to earth and help Edie collect her piracies. Burdened with those, she whispered a secret to Herb, who said, "All right, Thursday night," to which Edie added, "So if you get my ticket, Herb, I can pay you for it at the dance."

On again for a brief transit of outer space till they hit the earth again at Puncheon's yard, and the moon stopped dead and stared hard down at them. Fortu-

nately, there was a cow in the garage and it began knocking over tins and blundering about in the glare of the head lights, so they were able to leave Herb having a row with it while Jerry got Angel across to the back verandah. There he found his voice with a rush of words that stammered because there was so much to say and no time to say it in. If this had been Mazie Potts he would have been stammering for something to say. But this was tall cool Angel Puncheon, who could not be approached. A miracle wipes out all funblings after faith.

“. . . Angel, how lovely you are; God! how I love you. Angel, you've got the loveliest face! Angel, I'm mad over you,—Angel——”

“Silly boy, Jerry.”

“How lovely, lovely, lovely, you are.”

“You kiss nicely, Jerry.”

“But to kiss you!”

He groaned, because such kissing could not be expressed except by kissing.

“Angel, listen. Slip out when they're all asleep.”

“No no, Jerry.”

“But I *must* see you.”

“Silly boy.”

“But I must, I must. Promise you'll come out.”

“But you sleep with Herb.”

Jerry almost climbed up her to clench a concession. “But I can slip out; he'll never know. I'll come to you; can I—can I——”

Angel only smoothed his cheek with her lips and murmured, “Here's Herb.”

Jerry detached himself from her with a stifled groan as Herb came lurching and yawning across the yard. From a spasm of dislocated consciousness he discovered

them on the verandah and said, "What about bedo. C'm on, Jerry."

"All right, Herb."

"Good night, Jerry."

"Good night, Angel."

Agony, to see her go without a kiss.

Herb's bed time maunderings put him on the grid that night. Being a trifle used up, Herb undressed by stages, with trance interludes of yawning, back scratching, and waking up to continue a truncated monologue.

". . . Granted they're take downs,—what's the issue. String 'em on. String 'em till you got 'em where you want 'em. Then laugh. Laugh! I laugh. Ha-ha! Me,—I'm the mug. Right. Watch me. Same time—Now this Ede Potts. See her at work. Granted. Same time——"

Herb lit his pipe and got into bed. "Admitted this Ede Potts is a girl—Very well. As a dancer, got 'em all beat. Me for it? Not half. Same time; bonzer leg. Take down—String 'em—Mug—Laugh——"

Sleep sandbagged Herb there, to save Jerry from doing it. And that loosed adventure on Jerry with a shock that tingled to the roots of his hair. Impossible! There are some rewards that cannot be. Life might one day give him a million pounds or let him murder an art critic, but it could not give him Angel. Fifteen miles of kiss vanished in fantasy. With an arm and a leg out of bed he hung suspended, craving the coward's hope that funk would deny him a too great concession from destiny.

But he had to go; he knew that all the while. By taking his weight on an arm and a leg he slid out of bed without a sound. That is the only silent system of leaving a bed. He crawled to the door and Herb's

dog gave him a lick in the ear for luck as he squirmed out.

The moon was at its brightest, drenching the earth in a blue white radiance. Every tree in the orchard stopped whispering to watch Jerry slinking from shadow to shadow across the yard to the kitchen door.

There he hung, quaking. It was a large kitchen and he felt gingerly for the table to get his bearings. The house was full of snores and creaked abominably. With fingers reaching into space he tried to locate the door. There was a biscuit tin on the dresser——

Jerry touched that tin and it hit the floor with an almighty crash. Instantly snores stopped and Jerry went to earth under the dresser, where there was room to squeeze in between the bread and flour bins. There he gave up the ghost, because he could hear Mrs. Puncheon saying something about the milk set for cream, and Pa Puncheon making globular sounds of protest, as if ejecting a nocturnal cricket ball. But bed springs pinged and Pa's feet padded and light came ghosting down the passage.

Pa slept in a night shirt, and his candle filtered illumination down an immense pair of hairy legs that came to rest a foot from Jerry's nose. . . .

In telling Peter about this later Jerry described that moment as the choice thrill of a gallant adventure, but in its event he nearly expired of horror. Pa had only to bend for a biscuit tin and cry havoc at a scandal in the home. . . .

But the cat, directed by a divine agency, came into the kitchen and rubbed itself against Pa's legs, and Pa kicked it in the guts and it streaked with a yowl into the night. Appeased for disturbed slumbers, as all must be who have just kicked a cat, Pa shut the back

door and padded forth on spectral legs, trailing blessed darkness behind him. A door closed, bed springs pinged, Pa regurgitated his cricket ball and silence fell.

A brave man would have abandoned the adventure there, knowing that destiny was in arms against him. Jerry was a craven, and those alone dare death, even at the hands of one Pa and three brothers. But he stayed under the dresser for an immeasurable gap of darkness till the house was full of snores again.

This time he came forth on all fours and so progressed down the passage, counting doors. Angel's was the third on the left, as he knew well, but to know a thing like that does not convince you for a moment in the dark. How do you know that some ghastly treachery of self frustration may not lead you to a brother's lair. How do you know whether you really want to defy destiny, even for an Angel Puncheon. More lives have been wrecked outside a bedroom door than by all the disruptions that may lie behind it.

The door was ajar and a gossamer touch opened it into a scented space of girl. Jerry breathed that slogan of a million midnight quaverers, "It's only me," and a calm bare arm came out of the night and took possession of him. . . .

There is a theory that the gods cannot do a decent thing; perhaps they don't know how to. Or perhaps they inaugurate a decency only that nemesis may slink upon its tail. But that takes time, and time is merely a relative from whatever altitude you view it from, and from the Olympus that achieves an Angel you multiply the moment by infinity and know exactly what eternity means. Not that you bother to know a trifle like that when you are gassed to the ears with power and conceit and dare not whisper above a breath lest you

blow the roof off;—death to the makers of wooden houses. . . .

Roosters told Jerry that dawn was somewhere about and he had to go. Even so, he kept going to the passage and sneaking back for another armful of Angel. When he went at last no cake tins crashed upon his exit; conquest makes no such bungling concessions to funk. The moon had gone down and it was dark before dawn, and Jerry crawled into Herb's room on his hands and knees, and Herb's dog licked a "What did I tell 'you" into his ear as he squirmed into bed.

There he had to cram his mouth with pillow to contain ecstasy at life's greatest thrill. Pure fantasy, of course; that alone made it credible. He could not sleep with such a marvel to think about, and the queer thing was that he was probably happier thinking about the possession of Angel than in possessing her. He had to take a bite at the pillow every time he was rushed with the incredible thought that he would see her again next day. Impossible to sleep, waiting for it. In a flash he was asleep with a fatuous smile on his face.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT WAS five days later that Gresham said impatiently at the breakfast table, "Where on earth is young Jerry?"

"Mysteriously absent," said Nina.

"No, but where is he?"

"Oh, somewhere on the land. I saw him at the Manly Carnival with one of the Puncheon louts."

"But this is ridiculous. I won't have him planting himself on stray people. Find out where he is and tell him to come home."

In the two seater Nina arrived at the Puncheon homestead that afternoon and walked briskly to the front door, which was open. Before she had time to knock Jerry came suddenly into the passage from the front room and frowned at her. He had seen her arrive and wished to repress impertinences before they could be uttered in that house.

"Oh, there you are," said Nina carelessly. "There seems to be a sort of an idea at home that it's time you came home. Oh,—good afternoon."

That was to Angel, who had come out of the front room behind Jerry. She smiled somewhere at Nina, and her calm eyes accented Nina's brisk inconsequential air.

"Hope this lad hasn't been making a nuisance of himself. He doesn't seem to have any sense of the correct length of a call."

"We're very pleased to have Jerry here."

"Nice of you to say so. Afraid it's only your polite way of refusing to throw him out."

"Oh, no; Jerry knows he is welcome."

Angel put a sisterly arm round Jerry's shoulder and let it remain there in an absent minded way. She either rejected an accent of humour in Nina or did not know that such a thing existed. Jerry scowled at Nina, terrified that some awful insolence to the divine Angel might be forthcoming. But Nina found nothing whatever to say at the picture of Jerry posed intimately with the tall fair Angel. There was something about Angel's calm inexact glance that abashed her ego, and she was forced to reinstate it by dismissing a triviality at Jerry.

"Then I *may* tell them you'll be home for dinner."

"Yes."

Nina nodded at nobody and went, to skip into the car, bang the door, jam on the starter and go off with a rush. Always running away with her, that car was.

Jerry pressed his face to Angel's throat and groaned in agony.

"To think of leaving you, Angel!"

Angel only dawdled there, letting him cling about her, and run avid hands over her, and make smothered sounds against her. He was a perpetual motion lover, unable to have enough of Angel. At that time he did not know there was not enough of her to be had.

"Who does your sister go with?" she asked vaguely.

"Nina? I don't know."

"I don't really think it's Ronny Tregear, I think she's sweet on Jim Guthrie."

"On Jim?"

"Jim's pretty swift with girls. He doesn't go with them for nothing. I've seen him a lot with your sister at dances."

Jerry dismissed an irritating trifle. "Blow Nina; rotten little nark. I hate home, anyway. I hate like hell having to leave you, Angel. . . ."

But he went at last, snapping the umbilicus of a feminine imagist brought to birth at last by a real love affair. He lagged back across orchard lands glazed golden by the setting sun, and came out on the seaward side of the Key Heights road, drawn that way by the hope of seeing Peter. The one bright thing about this return home was that he had an enchanted tale to tell Peter. He had seen little of Peter those days; *he* too appeared to have retired the while from the holy solace of friendship.

By the lane that brought him to the Key Heights Road he came on Jim Guthrie's trawler attached to a smashed up car; an accident going to the garage. At that Jerry drew hurriedly back into the lane; his mother and Jim were standing by the trawler talking.

At an angle that hid him from them, Jerry vacillated, waiting for them to go, else must he walk half a mile back on his tracks. Jim was leaning on the trawler with his face turned blankly at the sunset, while Baby Gresham talked earnestly to him, caressing his arm. . . . Jerry's eye recorded a picture from which his eye rejected significance, protecting himself from any intimacy with his mother's affairs.

Another car passed, coming up from the sea side road, and its driver glanced quickly at the group by the trawler and away again. It was Gresham, but Jerry did not see that. He had turned to walk back down the lane. Jim's eyes saw the car pass, but not his mind, which was wandering in a limbo that Baby's urgent words tried to draw it back from.

" . . . Jim, I don't believe you feel all this. I mean,

you may feel it, but you are still using it as an excuse to let your nerves run away with you."

"That won't do, Honey; when a man's hunted by hell he doesn't need an excuse to run away from it."

"Hunted! You hunt yourself, Jim."

"Perhaps. It doesn't make it any less bloody awful, Honey."

She stared anxiously at him, bothered by his blank air, which refused to come back to rationalities.

"But what nonsense, Jim; as if anybody could have a conscience about killing at a war. At this date, too . . ."

"You're wrong, Honey, I haven't got a conscience about that; I don't care a tinker's curse for that."

"Well, what do you care so much about it for?"

He brought his eyes back to hers with an effort, bemused by the assumption that words have anything to do with obscure torments of the spirit. The figure of a stroller on the rise caught his eye and he knitted his brows, striving to elucidate a baffling image in simple terms.

"See that man up there?"

"Yes. Well?"

"Suppose I had a rifle here now and shot him dead."

"Don't be childish, Jim; you couldn't do a thing like that."

"Yes, you're right; I couldn't do it."

A frozen look congealed his face and Baby Gresham gave an impatient stamp.

"Enough of this, Jim; no one in their senses can believe that such a beastly thing as war exists. I can't; I refuse to believe it; I refuse to talk about it. Listen to me; do you want to go to that dance tonight?"

Jim blinked a couple of times and his face returned

suddenly to innocence. "Yes, Honey, I'd like to go. It's a night out with you, and that's heaven."

"Very well, call for me about eight. And listen, Jim, don't drink so much. . . ."

Gresham was loitering in the garden when she came up the drive and his impatient half turn to her and away plainly invited the releases of a little honest rancour. He needed it, and he had an excuse for it. That roadside picture of an intimacy seemed to tell him quite a lot of things; things which he required to have happened. But Baby passed on into the house, too deeply engrossed with her thoughts to see him. Gresham gritted his teeth; that was her all over. . . .

So Jerry got it. He tried to slink into obscurity at the table, but it was too large, even if Nina had not been there. She sat opposite him, and at either end sat his father and mother. Inspection from three angles. But his mother did not inspect him. That mood of serious thought still held her, and she wore a dressing robe, and her hair crimped in pins, which showed that she was going out that evening. Gresham's dark glare that refused to see these signals landed on Jerry.

"Where the devil have you been all this while?"

"Sponging on the beloved Puncheons," said Nina for him.

"But this is ridiculous; spending days at a house that is only half an hour's walk from your own."

They both stared at him, Gresham enraged with him, Nina amused at him. Both pretensions were false, but that did not help Jerry.

"Puncheons don't mind having me there."

"How do you know they don't. No people like a guest who plants himself on them for no definite reason."

"Oh, the reason's definite enough," put in Nina. "The attraction there is not the Puncheon louts but the Puncheon lady."

"Shut up!" spat Jerry, instantly furious.

"Queer taste she appears to have," added Nina.

Jerry was glaring so murderously at her that Gresham testily put that special theory of motives aside. "I don't mind you visiting these people but I won't have sponging on them for days. Besides, there's your school. Have you been going from that place to school?"

"Be reasonable, dad. You can't expect a man to conduct a grand passion and cart manure about and go to school too," Nina pointed out.

Jerry deferred inquiry on that point by shouting, "I tell you the Puncheons like having me there. Jolly nice people, the Puncheons. Why shouldn't I go to the Puncheons——"

"Damn the Puncheons. And don't you shout at me like that. I tell you I will not have you . . ."

Well, it was a good standardised row, and Jerry got a lot out of it; a little more than he wanted. A tragedy, if interdictions from the home were imposed on his sacred right to see as much as possible of Angel. Gresham got nothing out of it. Baby did not even see that he was in a devil of a temper with Jerry. . . .

He lurked thereafter in his room, not treadmilling his carpet, which was the exercise of a state of mind, but going furtively about the room so that he could also listen, which was the panther prowl of an outraged husband. Baby was shut up in her room, not merely making a toilet, but making a statement. That calm ruthless bar of light from her window conveyed it to

him, 'Since you have elected to have your own business, mind your own business.'

In short, his just claim to a little light entertainment retorted on by the crashing bon mot of a lover. And for nothing! That was the sting. . . .

He heard Jim's car arrive and his voice to the housemaid at the front door, "Tell Mrs. Gresham not to hurry; I'm early," and Gresham's prowl now vacillated over the awful compulsions of the husband to the lover. They won, and encased in urbanity, he strolled to the front room, astonished to find Jim there.

"Hallo, Jim, I didn't hear you arrive. You're dancing, are you?"

"Oh, just a local affair, Mr. Gresham."

"What are they like, those dances?"

"Pretty average. But there's not much in dancing, any way, is there?"

"Well, I rather like it."

Jim was mildly astonished at that. "I never go to one without swearing it will be the last," he admitted.

"You're young enough to swear off entertainments, Jim. What will you drink?"

"Whatever's there, thanks."

"There's whisky, as usual. A silly habit, always putting out a bottle of whisky; brandy's a much better drink."

"Yes, brandy's a good liquor, but I like rum best."

He poured a nobbler of whisky and drank it neat. His eyes were a little bloodshot, but he showed no other signs of a day's heavy drinking. Meditating over his glass, he said with his vaguely surprised air, "There's not much bite in liquor, is there?"

"Well, it's a long time since I tested my capacity to stand it, Jim."

Gresham discovered that he had no resentment against Jim; there was a quality in him that completely disarmed male antagonism, or else the lack of a quality to arouse it. Gresham studied him, puzzled by that negation, which had nothing to do with those affirmative qualities that made for Jim's easy appeal to women. His softly modulated voice made it direct; they had a secret to tell him, if he could only find out what it was. . . .

But Gresham's fifty years only itemised Jim's tall figure slimmed by evening dress, his crisply waved fair hair, his innocent blue eyes, his strong arms, used to lifting heavy weights—

He had the hands of a mechanic, muscular, steel clipped hands, with a darkened texture of machine oil which no scrubbing could remove. What image of caress could those hands convey to a woman?

Bah! What do women care for images of caress while being caressed. Baby came in there and resentment rushed to a focus on the charm of an evening toilet of black voile, which gave her the figure of a girl. She looked surprisingly young, as if the interval since dinner had taken ten years from her age. No hint escaped her that Gresham saw this alchemy of appearance, which was not for his eyes. Preoccupied with her shawl, she said to Jim, "Put a siphon and whisky in the car, Jim, you'll need a drink between dances."

Nina came in idly and studied her mother's toilet with a detached air, which reviewed feminine style as a motive that had nothing to do with feminine policy. "I'm never quite sure whether black suits you," she said, a little too innocent of malice.

"You aren't coming, Nina?" said Jim.

"No thanks; dancing in that brick barn to the Key Heights orchestra is not my notion of a perfect life."

Gresham presented the false bustle of a man who remembers a matter of business to be done. "Well, have a good time," he said to Jim, and got away in a hurry.

Nina stood on the verandah to watch the departure. Some hitch of the spirit delayed it a moment. Jim stowed bottles and glasses in the Sunbeam and took his seat. Baby got in beside him. Seated side by side they exchanged an enigmatical glance, which had something bewildered in it. Jim seemed to say 'Where to?' Baby to answer 'Nowhere.' Then Jim remembered that they were only going to a local dance and started the car.

Nina watched its tail light vanish down the drive and was attacked by a sudden melancholy because she also was going nowhere. An awful heresy came out of the night to tell her that there was nowhere to go. Only a child's game of going surfing and dancing and to draper's shops because a mysterious destination inside the mind did not exist outside it. That destination was shut up in fantasy, where a tender palpitating Nina nearly swooned at kisses that her cool firm lips knew nothing about. She had to keep that other Nina well under the covers of her little red diary, else might the wretch have got out and made her do all the wrong things. Do the wrong things and make a mess of life for ever. . . .

Above her a black sky pinpricked by stars; below her a blacker earth pinpricked by lights. And a frightful thing in the garden reaching for her with claws. A shudder iced her spine and she ran into the lighted front room with a gasp.

The Mechanic's Institute pinpricked space with a row of electrics too, which showed that a dance was being held there. That was its main concession to an event marked festive. Inside its hard white walls assaulted the eye and its hard seats the backside. Streamers of coloured paper made a mess of its ceiling. Its orchestra was a piano, a fiddle, a cornet and a drum.

A dance ended and its democratic convention split into class consciousness. Dress was its symbol. The men in evening dress took their partners to seats along the wall and the tweed clothed formalists dropped their girls anywhere and made for the door, where they lit cigarettes and felt safe, surrounded by themselves. These were bucolics mainly, with a few clerks and shop hands from Key Heights, and they resisted stubbornly standardisation from a racial type.

Their girls rushed to embrace it. Sisters of clerks, shop hands and bucolics, a snapshot of any one of them in New York or London would not have detected a racial genesis. Pretty dance frocks, bobbed or shingled hair, silk stockings and spike heeled shoes; emanations from the earth's massed feminine in fashion plate. *They* could carry off its ritual, but their men folk were noodles, ashamed of a display of graces in public, which left the girls seated about the hall between dances wearing a certain air of hauteur, as if they had expressly required an interval of seclusion just then. It was not really secluded, for their glances at each other priced every dress in the room, how long it had been worn, the state of its wearer's soul, and exactly what her relations were to her particular man. In fact, they knew more about each other's relations on that score than they did about their own.

Baby Gresham was doing a little of that sort of thing too, from the corner where she sat with Jim, who was distraught, and she had to pump gossip into him for the sake of publicity. Her attention kept returning to a tall fair girl opposite with a beautifully poised head, whose flat inattentive eyes looked at Baby too, but without seeming to see her. A bizarre reference to the hidden spaces of Jerry's existence brought her identity to Baby's mind.

"Isn't that the Puncheon girl over there, Jim?"

"Angel Puncheon; yes."

"She's beautiful, in a way. Queer, the men don't seem very attracted to her; she's only had four dances tonight."

"Yes; there's a loose end about her somewhere; never could place what it is——"

The orchestra started and he rose mechanically. Baby glanced at him questioningly and rose too. "You're not very keen on dancing tonight, Jim."

"Yes I am, Honey."

They danced, which is to say that they went about a room to a monotony of tub thumped jazz. Baby made a brave effort to combat depression under that beastly white light, which attacked the deepest preoccupations of her being. Jim's arms held her, but his feet forgot her. At the end of that dance they went to the car for a drink and she gave it up. "It's no use, Jim, I won't go back to that rotten hall again."

"Yes, Honey, it's simply hell."

"Why didn't you say so before, you wretched boy."

She was so angry that she nearly cried, but Jim only handed her a drink and took one himself. That over, he put away the glasses, started the engine, backed the

car out from the other parked cars and took the Key Heights road towards the sea.

They drove in silence till the Gresham house was passed and the dark stretch of bush road gained that led to the ocean. There Jim put his arm round her and drew her head to his shoulder.

“Don’t be angry with me, Honey,——”

“Oh, bother that private hell of yours, Jim.”

But anger went out of her and left her relaxed and at peace. This was what she needed, a caress, silence, swift motion and the security of night. She closed her eyes, or opened them languidly on the steady tunnel of light that drove with them, through bush land walled in by trees, or out on the verge of a headland, with the sea hundreds of feet below them, where the headlamps shot a beam of light into its void, till the curve of the road picked it up again;—on and on; a narcotic transit of space that soothed the need for journeys of the spirit.

But at Avalon Beach Jim turned the car in till it came to rest facing the dim changing radiance of the surf and there:—

“But if it’s such a little thing, Honey, why do you refuse it?”

“Because I’m really fond of you, Jim.”

“That’s not a reason.”

“A very simple one.”

“I don’t understand you, Honey.”

“You don’t understand yourself, Jim, but I do.”

“What do you mean by that, Honey?”

“You’ve had a lot of love affairs, haven’t you?”

“What’s that got to do with it.”

“Just as much as this one has got to do with all those.”

"I won't have that, Honey, it's not true."

"No, not now, but it would be twenty minutes after."

Jim pressed his lips to her throat, striving to divine what lie this was that made nothing of the vast sincerity of his emotion for her. "It's not true, Honey. Those girls—You don't know yourself; you don't know what a sweet thing you are. I'd never want another woman but you, never—never——"

His sincerity, at least, knew better than to trust to foolish lying words. It was too deep for that; deep as the charm he drew from her lips, her throat, the warm pulse of her body. His faith almost conquered her scepticism. She was suddenly flushed and confused. Why not?——

But that question is always its own negation. She drew a deep breath, which suspended her for its length over the resignations of a mature body, which has not enough to gain by a last act of rebellion. Without haste, she withdrew from Jim's arms.

"I'm sorry, Jim; you want to get rid of something; I want to keep it."

Jim let her go, and a black sullen expression replaced faith and tenderness in her service.

"That's all you want me for, then; to convince yourself that you can still pull a man to you."

That was true, and Baby was hurt by it.

"That is not true, Jim. I'm very fond of you."

"Oh no, I'm only a side issue."

"And what am I to you, Jim?"

"Anything you want to be."

"On the faith of all your past affairs, Jim?"

"Oh, to hell with them. I tell you that if I haven't got a woman like you to live for I'll blow my bloody brains out."

"Oh, don't say silly things like that; they mean nothing."

"Don't they?"

He pondered a moment, and then laughed. "There was a chap with our batallion in France; Bill Moody, an outback tough. One night five of us were in a dug-out and he said, 'I'm fed up with this,' and before any one could stop him he put a revolver to his head and pulled the trigger. But the trigger only clicked and nothing happened and he laughed at us. 'Had you going, didn't I,' he said. Well, he had; we all thought he meant it."

"Well, that's about what all these threats to commit suicide amount to."

"But the joke was, he had meant it; he shot himself with his rifle that night. And when we examined his revolver we found that the cartridge was a dud; it hadn't gone off—that was all."

Baby paused a moment over this interesting revelation before saying coldly, "I'm not exactly flattered if my only use to you is to stop you making a dramatic young fool of yourself."

"Oh, all right, let it go at that."

He set the car going, turned, and picked up the road again, and drove with speed. Baby sat frowning, disentangling the separate needs of two egos from conflict. Then her face cleared, for Jim's was set in a sullen mask of resentment. It was the first time she had thrown him off *that* balance. Not that she put it to herself in those terms; her gratified maturity said, 'After all, he's only a boy. . . .'

They drove in silence till the Key Heights road was gained, and there she put a caressing hand to his face.

"Jim, you asked *me* not to be angry with you to-night."

But Jim's anger had gone by that and left him flat. He dismissed himself from the kiss she offered, saying, "Oh, all right, Honey; I'm the fool. . . ."

Gresham had passed a black evening, prowling, carpet treading, whisky nipping, and making those sudden gestures of fury which announce a conviction of impotence. Incessantly his thoughts alternated the approved captions of an outraged husband; 'Obvious that she's deceiving me.' 'By God, I'll be even with her for deceiving me.' 'I don't care a damn if she *is* deceiving me.'

Exasperation is equal under each heading. And at every sound of a car on the road he darted to the window that looked out on the drive gates. It was half past two before a glare of headlights swung inwards, coming up from the seaward road.

That confession of deceit gave Gresham the shock that always confirms a treachery. He turned off his light in haste, so that he could watch the car garaged, and two dim figures come slowly across the garden to the drive, where Jim had left his car. Its lights were switched on, but it did not depart. From behind a screen of shrubs Gresham heard the low pitched tone of their voices. . . .

Conviction of treachery demands its spectacle. In a fever lest he miss it, Gresham sped silently across the courtyard and into the front room. From its darkened windows he could look out into the drive.

A flare of light on the gravel cut the car out in silhouette. Baby stood at the open door, talking into Jim's face. An arm was round his neck, her voice had

a cajoling note; twice she reached over to kiss him. . . .

At the same pace of silent fury, Gresham got back to his room again, white with rage.

“That settles it,” he said, and had to control himself from smashing the whisky bottle instead of pouring a nobbler from it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GRESHAM secreted the venom of an outraged husband, which may have been the proof that he needed it, even if he did not desire it. But he showed it, all the same. He showed it in such puerilities as damning the toast, and refusing to eat breakfast, and snapping the paper open so that he tore it, and in saying to Jerry, "Look here, I'm not paying for your education at an expensive school to have you drivelling your time away as an amateur farm hand. Just understand that I intend to find out what your attendance has been this quarter."

"It'll be in the report," said Jerry, aghast. That damned report. . . .

There were bills among Gresham's letters and he snatched at one to transfer puerility at Nina.

"My God! A hundred and eighty four pounds from David Jones and half of it for dance frocks. Dance frocks! You wear the things half a dozen times and throw them away. I won't have this infernal squandering of money by you women; you'll pull up on your dress allowance or——"

Nina got up coldly and left the table. Deleting the coldness, it was an imitation of his wife's refusal to give rancour its just and proper need for reprisals.

Nina was merely scornful at a petty exhibit of breakfast table spleen. But as her father passed the courtyard she saw him cast a look of hate at his wife's closed bedroom door. . . .

It gave her the shock of an indecent revelation, which defended her adolescence from a disgraceful intrusion by parents on its own sacred stultifications. Emotional antics, forsooth, from these elders of a petrified earth, whose only business is to respect the imperious aspirations of their children—

Nina put all that to a conviction that she was surrounded by undignified people in the home who left her alone to uphold its dignity. She reviewed with fury all the things *she* was not doing; her mother maintaining a flirtation with Jim, who was anybody's property, her father sneaking affairs with unknown wenches on ferry boats, Wally leading some sort of awful existence in Sydney and even that idiotic young Jerry posing as an agricultural libertine.

Minor stings accumulate on a central aggravation. Ronny rang her up to ask her to come surfing and added, "What about tonight; are you coming?"

"Where to?"

"The mater's party at the Pacific."

"She hasn't asked me."

"I'll ask you."

"Then I won't go."

She slammed the receiver up; that beastly Fanny Tregear sniping at her now because Drake. . . .

Drake might figure in Nina's diary as the divine lover of fantasy, but in action she shuffled him out of her thoughts with a certain impatience, which was due to always feeling a fool in his presence. It forced her to overdo cocksurenness from any footling rot about sentiment towards him, thereby forcing Drake to treat her with the good humoured tolerance of a kind uncle; a pose objectionable both to himself and Nina.

Still the victim of indignities from the home, she

pulled up at the garage that afternoon and Mrs. Squatling bustled across from her car for a breathless burst of gabble. Mrs. Squatling was a stout woman always breathless with good works as well as gabble, and she never talked scandal, which is to say that she never talked anything else.

“. . . So glad to see your mother at one of our dances though she *did* go early, but I suppose *our* attractions were a little too slow for her, and what I wanted to ask you was would you people help at our next Ambulance Dance; just a hand to decorate the hall and perhaps Mr. Gresham would look in for five minutes to advise, I do hear he's taken to dancing and were you one of his party at the Ambassadors last week, —oh, it wasn't a party, of course, just a private dinner with a lady friend and I do hope you'll come to our meeting on Thursday. . . .”

“That old hag ought to be scragged,” said Nina viciously to Billy Cowan. “She's the prize sample of every other scandal-mongering bitch in this rotten hole.”

Billy nodded dispeptically. “Things are pretty crook here too,” he said.

“Where's Jim?”

“Up there.” That meant the Key Heights Hotel. “We're chock up with work, too, and he hasn't done a stroke. Just taken to living on booze.”

“Oh, he's an idiot, Billy, you can't do anything with him.”

Everybody doing the wrong thing, and only Nina aware of their silly inconsequential lives. In the courtyard at home her mother was seated with a towel across her knees, her hair fluffed out from washing, and a manicure set beside her. She made a dawdling diver-

sion out of these matters which any one with sense got rid of as a necessary nuisance.

"You'll have to sober Jim up if you're taking him to Fanny Tregear's dance; I understand he's taken seriously to booze," said Nina disparagingly.

"Poor Jim," was all Baby said to that. It sounded like an obituary tribute, not without a certain solace to the bereaved. But the funeral was not quite over, for she called Jim later on the telephone, and Nina, coming out on tip toes to listen, detected conflict of agreement over its ceremonial.

"You won't—Why not?—That's silly.—Oh, I don't insist, do as you please. I'm not particularly keen on going, but of course I won't go unless I'm sure of a dance partner.—Well, you needn't, come after dinner.—Very well, you promise. And listen, I *may* have something to say to you——"

How far that "may" depended on the timely subjection of a husband remained in abeyance, because Gresham did not come home to dinner. Requested to mind his own business, he retorted an assumption of that business by dining alone in town. If that business came along, he intended to have a precedent for late hours in its service. It also dodged going home by the same boat as Mildred. Seated thereafter in his office, he darkly meditated that special reprisal on wives, a nicely furnished room in town which no one should know of but himself; no one but that business.

Thus Nina dined alone that night, Jerry being also absent. Defiance of a parent could not be credited with such a persistent defiance of his orders; there must be a powerful motive behind these slinking antics. But Nina could not be bothered with a preposterous theory of Jerry as a conquering lover; she was sad; oppressed

by the manifold injustices of an austere ideal of conduct in the home, with its ironic retort on that swooning lady of fantasy locked up in Nina's little red diary. But Nina was suddenly sick of that other Nina. Wandering the house for something to do, she came to her bedroom and taking out her diary wrote:—

“All this utter rot about love. Determine to devote myself to——”

She sat frowning over a vocation which would rid life of a fatuous dream of emotional surrender to it. Nursing, Swimming, Flying, were written in and crossed out. . . .

It was nine o'clock when a car came up the drive to the front door, and hurrying out to listen, she heard Drake's voice to the housemaid, “Just tell Miss Graham I want to see her for a moment.”

Nina came to the front room to find a casual visit a little out of normal, with Drake in a dinner suit without a hat.

“What are *you* doing here?” she asked, clearly not condoning an irregularity.

“Come to take you round to the hotel. Run along and slip on a frock; I'll wait.”

“What rot; I'm not going there.”

“Quite right; I didn't think you would. Shall I dismiss the taxi, or would you prefer to come for a drive?”

“You'll want it to go back in,” protested Nina.

“I'm not going back; not just yet, anyway.”

“You've cleared out from Fanny Tregear's dance.”

“Yes.”

“How frightfully rude.”

“Frightfully. You won't come for a drive? All right:——”

He went out to dismiss the taxi, leaving Nina very perturbed at this arbitrary piracy of her company. She had never been alone like this with Drake before. He came back, lit a cigarette, and took a chair to stretch himself out comfortably, though he was not quite so much at ease as he looked. Nina's constrained pose, leaning against the side table, did not help that, either. The assumption that she was only a pretty brown skinned girl on an ocean beach failed to work out correctly just then.

"This isn't a casual visit, Nina; there are one or two things I want to talk to you about. For a start, I've had enough of this country and I'm going back to Europe shortly."

"I wonder you ever left it."

"Oh, I'm always leaving it to have the pleasure of coming back to it. I say, don't sit on that table edge; come and sit on my knee."

Nina removed herself to the arm of a chair, saying, "Don't start talking drivels."

"There you are; I knew it. And sitting on my knee is one of the things I've come to talk about. I feel that it will be a great mistake on your part if you let me go back to Europe without getting to know me better."

"Why?"

"Why? What a question. If you were sitting on my knee you wouldn't think of asking it. And how are we to discuss the terms of getting to know me better unless you know me better?"

"What a mad idea; you can't get to know people by arranging to know them."

"I admit that it's not the best way, but then, you run away from all the other systems."

"I do not," said Nina indignantly.

"You've been running away from me ever since I met you. And the second time I met you you invented an absurd pet name and have been calling me by it ever since. Come, Nina, own up to a confession of love:—I am, you see."

Nina was looking at him in a peculiar way, the way a child tries not to look when accused of a delinquency. Drake lost his cue of putting her at ease by a little light foolery, disturbed by an emotion which was the other part of her inability to express emotion. He jumped up and came across to put an arm round her and say hurriedly, "Come, Nina, don't force me to talk rot; it's only in self defence, really. I've been frightened to take you seriously because I'm serious about you. Now, you won't run away from me again, will you?"

Nina tried to say "No," but that other Nina had got into her throat and would not let her. If she let that ass out she would make a fool of herself and if she did not she would make a mess of the situation. If Drake had only not been such a perfect lover. . . .

The telephone bell rang sharply, and Nina jumped at an impact on her nerves. "Oh, I must go," she gasped, and ran out of the room.

The telephone was in an embrasure at the end of the passage and she put the receiver to her ear in a flurry that failed to catch a gabbled message buzzed into it. "I can't hear,—what is it,—who's speaking," she said angrily.

"It's me, Bill Cowan. Is that you, Miss Gresham?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Can someone come here quick; I think Jim's dying."

"What!!!"

"I don't know what to do. I just came in here and found him. He's——"

"I can't hear. What?"

"I don't know. Couldn't someone come?"

"Where are you? The garage?"

"Yes."

"I'll come."

She dropped the receiver, bewildered. Tell Drake? But an anticlimax on the crisis of a confusion by perfect love was too much for her. And that beastly word "Dying!" On tip toe she fled out of the house and across the yard to back out the two seater and bolt in it.

A southerly had brought up rain, and Nina drove through it without a hat, suspended from thinking by an alarm of action. In five minutes she was at the garage, which was closed, but a light showed under its doors and the side door to the office was open. She took a deep breath before she could enter it. . . .

On the floor of the garage beside the open door of a sedan Billy Cowan was supporting Jim across his knee. Alarm distended Nina's eyes at the pallor of Jim's face, and the lifeless inertia of his whole body.

"What on earth's happened?"

"He's gassed."

"Gassed?"

"I found him in this car with the floor board up and all the windows closed and the engine going. It was hearing the engine that made me come in. . . ."

Nina was feverishly feeling Jim's heart, uncertain over its feeble beat. But his body was warm. She jumped up and hurried to the office to find a number in the telephone directory and call it.

". . . Is Dr. Bailey in?—Will you tell him to come

at once to the garage, Jim Guthrie has been gassed.—Yes, I'll wait.—Thanks, it's urgent.—”

“Why didn't you ring the doctor at once, Billy?” asked Nina going back to the garage.

“I didn't like to.”

“But why?”

“Well, what was he doing in that car with the windows closed and the floor board——”

“Oh!!”

Nina stared with consternation at Jim, a few febrile breaths from the eternal threat of unknown spaces. An easy way out:—he *had* meant that emanation of despair; he had killed himself. “I will” and “I won't” in a breath. A muddled impulse to defend herself against the enigma of the self slayer made Nina wish to run out of the garage. Jim's leaden face repelled her too; she felt estranged from something that was not Jim. . . .

But Dr. Bailey, brisk and busy, brought that limp marionette of death back to its proper stage setting in life. Without a word he went rapidly over it, felt its pulse, turned up an eyelid, pulled out a hypodermic and injected a dose into the forearm.

“He'll do,” he said, getting up. “He's badly doped, that's all. How did it happen?”

Billy glanced at Nina. “Don't know, Doctor. I came in and found him like this. I think he must have been working at the engine of this car. It was going and the garage being closed and that——”

“H'm, third case I've had of this lately; one was a returned soldier too,” said Dr Bailey. “Better get him into bed; where does he lodge?”

“His room's at the back.”

“All right; take him under the arms, Billy.”

They carried Jim through the back of the garage to a small two roomed shanty behind it, Nina following. In the dark she fumbled for the electric catch and flicked light over the untidy little bedroom, with its unmade bed, on which Jim was laid while the Doctor and Billy undressed him and got him into his pyjamas.

These ministrations to an inert male aroused in Nina the maternal desire to meddle with him too. A warm compunction for Jim was busy with her, now that he was not dead. She had a property right in him too, by her part in an act of resurrection.

"He can't be left like this, can he, Doctor?" she said.

"Better have somebody to keep an eye on him. Is there anybody about here——"

"I'll do it. You see, Billy rang me the moment he found Jim, knowing he was a friend of ours. I'd be only too glad to look after him."

"Very well, Nina. Just keep him warm and give him a cup of strong coffee when he comes to. He's all right; didn't have enough poison to do him much harm. . . ."

Left in charge, Nina found a vocation of nurse at a loss for immediate action, with Billy staring solemnly at her across Jim's inert figure. She felt the need to justify a generous emotion for Jim by keeping busy, and glanced about the unswept room, littered with clothes, books and machine parts.

"What a mess; I'll have to clean it up. Could you shift all that iron stuff, Billy? And about coffee? Is there anything to make it on?"

"There's a gas ring."

"I'll have to go home and get some coffee. I won't be long. And we'd better stick to it that this was an accident."

Billy nodded and Nina went out to the car. It was raining lightly and the southerly nipped through her thin frock, but brisk with action she disdained that. It contributed an effect of strenuous endeavour in a worthy cause, which may have assisted her not to remember Drake till her car was in the drive. Perturbed, she got out and went cautiously across the garden to inspect the front room. . . .

But Drake had gone. It simplified a brisk refusal to speculate on exactly what state of mind he had taken with him. The servants were in bed, but she found coffee in the pantry, and made a collection of eggs, bread, butter and bacon. Her practicality was not so efficient as it might have been, for she forgot a coffee pot and a frying pan, and nearly forgot to account for her absence from home all night, but recalled that in time to scribble on a sheet of paper, "Jim has managed to get himself gassed. Dr. Bailey says he is all right. Am looking after him—Nina," and left it on her mother's dressing room table. With that she slipped on a hat and raincoat and scuttled away with her basket of food.

Back at Jim's room she said firmly, "Now, Billy, you can scoot, I'll finish cleaning up the room and you'll need to be here early so that I can get away."

"All right; what time?"

"Seven will do."

Left alone, Nina set about housemaiding the room with an effect of being under pressure to get an urgent job done. The urgency went elsewhere, to combat a blank feeling at the back of her mind that life had brought her its one perfect moment of surrender to love and she had run away from it. An excuse? Excuses can't recapture life's perfect moment. An unde-

fined conviction lurked there to tell her that her incompetence in love had snatched at an excuse to snatch another incompetent from death. Jim! As if he mattered. . . .

Jim's eyes were open, mistily staring at her, and it gave her the shock of a self detection. "Oh, you're alive," she gasped, but corrected that to add hurriedly, "It's all right, just lie quiet; I'll be back in a moment."

She sped to the little kitchen and lit the gas ring. There was a kettle and she put it on to boil. A cup had to be found and washed. Then she said "Idiot!" noting the forgotten coffee pot. A teapot had to serve and she poured half a packet of coffee into it. A rotten nurse; she didn't even know how to make coffee. Her handkerchief was clean and she used it as a strainer.

Jim was still blankly staring and she had to lever him up to drink the coffee. He got it down and lay back, working his throat, to find out where his voice had got to, and his vague frown tried to account for Nina too.

"You, Nina," he muttered.

"How do you feel, Jim?"

"Pretty rotten; I've got a head."

An effort to force thought on its nausea made him close his eyes. He opened them presently to discover Nina again.

"How did you get here?"

"Oh, I just came."

"How did I get here?"

"We carried you."

"Who did?"

"Billy and Dr. Bailey."

"Dr. Bailey . . ."

His thoughts picked up a broken memory there and

he muttered "Oh hell!" It sounded like a confirmation of despair, and Nina said hurriedly, "Don't bother about that now, Jim, have some more coffee."

He took it, but his frown had settled at a sullen resentment at a pernicious meddling with his destiny.

"How did you find out?"

"I didn't; Billy found you and rang me and I called in Dr. Bailey, and that's all. He says you're all right. Are you warm?"

"I'm all right."

"No, but are you?"

"Yes—I don't know. What does it matter?"

"You've got to keep warm."

She pulled the bed clothes up and tucked them round his shoulders. The ministrations of her hands soothed the lines of his frown, and his face became innocent.

"This is good of you, Honey."

"Rot, Jim."

"You've saved my life."

A hysterical impulse made Nina gasp, "Then what on earth did you want to take it for?"

Jim's stare tried to account for that impossible dilemma which seeks the fear of death to escape a greater terror of life, but only the childish and devastating images of self pity rushed his mind.

"I've been in hell; I couldn't stand it any longer——"

He wept suddenly, shaking the bed clothes and trying to turn his face to the pillow, and horrifying Nina with an uprush of compassion for him. She darted to the bed to put her arms round him, petting him and protesting, "Don't; stop it, Jim. You mustn't give way like this:—Stop,—do stop——"

He stopped as suddenly, consoled by the warm

clutch of her arms. His hand came out of bed and found hers and held it. Aware of an emotional crisis, Nina remained in that pose, her face against his.

The pose endured till it became cramped. She raised her head to note that Jim's eyes were closed. He seemed to have gone to sleep. Then she remembered that the gas ring was still burning and tried gingerly to detach herself. Instantly Jim was awake and alarmed.

"Don't leave me, Honey."

"But I only want to put the gas out."

"No, don't go."

"But I'll come back; I won't be a moment."

She hurried out to turn off the gas and returned to seat herself on the bed and take Jim's hand. "I'll stay here all night, Jim, you needn't worry. Try to go to sleep. Will you?"

"Yes, Honey."

With docility he closed his eyes, still holding her hand.

That vigil endured for a long time, sustained by Nina's consciousness of power to console a weakling; a timely conceit that disposed of a need for consolation on her own account. She studied Jim's face with the detachment of an artist for subject matter; that insidious complacency which makes the artist so much its creature. Colour had returned to it; he breathed easily; a handsome vacuous innocent, soothed of a single care by the magic of Nina's hand.

A shiver brought Nina's shoulders up; the small weather board house was chilly and the southerly blew in gusts that sluiced rain against the window panes. Another thing her efficiency had overlooked was a warm coat. She kicked off her shoes and drew her

feet up on the bed to cover them with the blankets. That presently induced a delicious warmth at one extremity which assisted to congeal the other.

No joke, an all night vigil on those terms, when one's mind is also wandering on the trail of another arrested climax. She wished to get up and make coffee to keep herself from nodding, but at any move Jim's hand closed automatically on hers. Whatever unknown he wandered in required to keep that clutch on earth.

In an hour's time Nina was wandering in vacuum too, and waking up with little shivers of protest at the cold. Nurses must be made of iron, and one vocation was renounced that night. It was unendurable, and by worming herself under the blanket from the feet up she got her shoulders covered. Jim was safe in coma and did not matter anyway and the warmth was delightful. She blinked at the light to keep herself awake. . . .

She blinked at the light, but it was the cold light of dawn.

That evaded her, because her eyes closed again and remained closed. A confusion between sleeping and waking failed to decide which was which. A soft voice was murmuring endearments a mile away, but a vast languor troubled her senses, as if they functioned at some remote point from her mind. She was uttering little vague sounds of protest without knowing it; something of importance to sleeping or waking kept evading her. Everything evaded her except a vanishing alarm. . . .

She lay for a long time with her eyes fast shut before deciding that she was awake, and must open them.

That required a great effort of will, because Jim was leaning up gazing down at her and saying, "Honey, darling, wake up; don't pretend you're asleep."

He bent to kiss her, but Nina evaded that by slipping from the bed with an astonished glance at the window.

"Heavens, I'm a nice nurse; I've been asleep——"

"But, Honey——"

"With the light burning too. What's the time? Billy will be here at seven. Are you better? I must get you some breakfast; I brought some eggs. You could eat an egg. . . ."

She was gabbling to escape talking.

"But, Honey, darling——"

She fled to the kitchen. . . .

There an egg met its death by being cracked into a saucepan before that was discovered not to be a frying pan, and she put the egg on to boil in mistake for the kettle. When she got that right there was no place to cook the egg, and she had to think hard before deciding to make coffee first and boil the egg afterwards.

"What the devil are you doing there, Honey?"

She jumped in her stocking soles to discover Jim in the doorway, still questing her for an admission that had nothing to do with the maladministration of food.

"Getting your breakfast," said Nina crossly.

"I never eat breakfast."

"Oh, bother——" She stared at him uncertainly.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes:—but I couldn't eat anything."

"Hadn't you better go back to bed?"

"Why?"

"Well, you know that——"

But there were things that Jim also did not want to know, and his eyes evaded hers for a moment.

"I only feel a bit rocky; I drank a lot yesterday."

"You're quite sure——"

"Yes, quite."

He turned with her to the bedroom while she put on her shoes and hat and picked up the rain coat.

"Are you going, Honey?"

"I'd better, Jim. After all, everybody won't know why I stayed here last night."

She flushed up to the eyes and backed hastily to the door, saying "I'll see you later, Jim," and dodged through it, leaving Jim's eyes without any answer at all.

In the clear air of dawn refreshed by a night of rain she drew a deep breath, which tingled to her toes. Everything had sharp bright edges to it; a new earth born of a new Nina. For a flash she glimpsed that profundity which knows that all reality begins by the recreation of that mysterious thing which is I. . . .

Then she was a busy young rationalist again, taking possession of her damp car. The engine was cold and she had to buzz it awhile to get the car started.

The household was still abed and she slipped quietly to her bedroom, and began to sort out a change of underlinen before going to the bathroom. But at the door she turned back for a cool unbiased inspection of her face in the mirror; the face that had refused to make admissions to Jim.

"Was that all?" she said to it. . . .

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

YOUTH is always something ahead of us. It's ahead of us in youth; how the hell can I expect to catch up with it at fifty?"

On that dark thought Gresham was driving slowly home from a self imposed penance on a deceitful wife. Sitting in an office meditating reprisals on her failed to convince him of their rewards, which was one way of admitting that in this warfare of the married ego wives always won.

He took the Manly road home and the road went past him, because he had nowhere to go on it. On the Corso booths had come down; Carnival was over. . . .

But at Colleroy he glanced up at the heights, and noted the garage doors of Floyd's camp open and alight. It was Saturday, and Floyd was week ending there with Uncle Buncle. It was also nine o'clock, and a drink with Floyd was better than going home for it at that hour.

The road up to the camp was narrow and spiralled and came out on a roughly cleared space shot with light from the camp. Another car was there; a battered thing, lobbed to rest on a flat tire. Through the camp doors he glimpsed active figures, and Floyd's broad square silhouette emerged, peering. As Gresham stepped down he hurried out to say, "My God! I'm glad you've come."

Gresham understood an accent of consternation by the shout of welcome that greeted him, which came

from Wally. Behind Wally the green faced Wilkins raised a bottle, as exhorting all to witness a reunion of noble beings. Behind them were another youth and three girls: these posed on a couple of Floyd's emergency mattresses on the floor.

"The very man we wanted," exclaimed Wally, hustling Gresham across to the girls. "Ida's here; I want you to meet her."

"Yes, I like meeting Ida," said Gresham.

From her squatting pose on the floor Ida gave him her upward downward smile as she slid forward and rose on her perfectly oiled joints. Wally dismissed the other two girls by saying somewhere at them, "Trixy, Edna," and added, "You know Wilkins, of course, and Pete Triplet. No, you haven't met Pete."

Triplet was an obtuse faced youth with a trenchant eye, and he gripped Gresham's hand and held it ruthlessly. "Please to meet yer," he said, which meant that this was a fine moment for Gresham. His hair had the distinguished quality of all Wally's circle and was rich with an unwashed deposit of natural oil and his hand had the dank clutch of a bivalve, and Gresham had some difficulty detaching his own from it. His glance at the girls failed to know which was Trixy and which Edna, but it distinguished them as species, for one was clearly a lizard and the other a succubus.

"Couldn't have happened better." Wally was saying. "We were just thinking of running round to get you. Look here, dad——"

"Wait a minute, Wally, your methods of introduction are too sketchy. Ida, please introduce me to your friends."

Ida said "Trixy Whipple," at the succubus and

"Edna Trab," at the lizard, and added, "Trixy and I have a flat together, we're doing trade work."

"Oh, you got away from home;—that's good."

But Trixy (how wrongly may a succubus be named), had already dismissed Gresham as a subject worthy of witchcraft. She sat cross legged on the floor and her brooding ominous eyes looked through him and some distance beyond him. A cigarette dripped from her underlip, and she dribbled smoke over her face like a sorceress looking through the fumes of a cauldron.

Slightly baffled, Gresham turned to Edna, who wagged a limp paw at him and said, "Chin chin, old sport," which established him as an intimate on the spot. She had slid off the bedding and unkinked on the floor; her figure was so loosely articulated that the sections refused to join up. It looked as if she had been pulled out in a soluble state and had remained limp ever since. Her black hair was Eton cropped, which made her silly little head look one size smaller than a head could possibly be.

"And—eh,—are you going in for art too?" inquired Gresham, at a loss for small talk with a lizard.

"God!—no. I've only got two hobbies; booze is one of them." And as offering Gresham a present partnership in that one she added affectionately, "Do get me a spot, old sport."

"Of course; glad you reminded me——"

Gresham moved across to the table near the door, where he said with surprise, "Hallo, Captain Gruntle; I didn't see you before."

Captain Gruntle intended not to be seen. He was jammed up against the wall between a cupboard and an overcoat, and he was corked up with his pipe, and nodded fiercely at Gresham over it, defying him or

anybody else to get him out from behind these defences. Uncle Buncle, deeply disgusted, had got himself into a small space under the cupboard, and protruded a fat back at the company, refusing to countenance its intrusion on that holy spot.

Floyd sidled up to Gresham and muttered in his ear, "Look here, I've had them here since three. They dined here; I believe they intend to sleep here. Can't you do something about it?"

"Certainly not; they might come and stay with me."

"It's not the lads; I can stand them. It's those dam' wenches."

Floyd's disgruntled state pleased Gresham, and he got the girls their drinks, and put Wally off with, "Yes, yes, Wally, plenty of time;—we'll discuss that later."

He understood the treachery behind his warm welcome there, and deferred it by pulling a deck chair in among the girls for safety, turning on them the false aplomb of one also safe from them.

"Why don't you girls sit on chairs? It makes me uncomfortable seeing you all squatting about on the floor."

"We prefer to squat," said the brooding Trixy.

"But why do you prefer to squat?"

"Because chairs are the conventions of a crude civilization and *We* are Primitives."

"Oh," said Gresham, enlightened.

"We clarify the mental retina by rejecting all petrifed formulas."

"I see."

"We begin from the basic structure of form; the floor. Thus we have the correct level to view things as they are. We see ourselves as we are. We see Other People as they are *not*."

"Exactly,—very clever. Are you a primitive too, Ida?"

"I don't think so; I can't learn the patter."

"You have an asymmetrical mind," said Trixy, dismissing her.

"And what shaped mind have I got?" asked Gresham.

Trixy dribbled smoke at him with detached insolence. "Oh, one of those quite correct things; best taste in periods. Probably stopped short somewhere about Queen Anne."

"Well, that's something. I might have stopped short at Queen Victoria."

"Queen Victoria never existed; a myth, obviously. We only admit existence to——"

But Wally burst in there. He had been jotting items on a paper in consultation with Wilkins and Triplet, and now insisted on attention to them.

"Look here, dad,—Shut up, Trixy. It's about that review. No, wait a minute; I don't want you to consider any question of financing it now; all I want is to outline our conception of it. Understand that, dad; no obligation implied unless you thoroughly approve. Now, in the first place, we decide to do without any platform——"

"Our platform is to have none," announced Wilkins.

"Exactly. We criticize life, but don't wish to reform it."

"To Hell with Utopias," chanted Wilkins.

"Exactly. We accept the basic principle of life to be intentional imbecility. Not progress, but a static asylum of human bipeds. Very well, we therefore reject the Greek as the symbol of values, and substitute the Wowser as the symbol of no values. See

the point? We get at the highest by stating the lowest. We accept the Wowser as a fixed point of baseness. We *need* the Wowser. But we don't attack him, mind you; we examine him. We take the cover off his inhibitions. We——”

“Expose the dirty crawler.”

“Exactly. We put him like a bug under the microscope. We note what he defines as bad; that gives us the key to what is good. See the point; a reversal of definitions. We give Australian prose a new kick by reversing stigma valuations on words——”

“Smash the bloody dictionary.”

“Exactly. The good conscience of the Wowser exists as a dictionary definition. Cut the definition from under him and we have him floundering all over the pot. Take any words used by him as stigma values,—sensuality,—erotic,——”

Triplet had been thrusting in a trenchant front at intervals to say “Culture values——” but as Wally refused to give him a hearing he suddenly demanded it by shouting, “Purely destructive values arrive negation; must affirm culture values as fixed point attack destructive values. Culture values based on modern idiom style James Joyce.”

That set both Wally and Wilkins bellowing in duet, “To hell with the modern idiom; it's got whiskers on it. We create our own idiom. James Joyce is only the Academic in hell. . . .”

Secure under an uproar that must detach attention from him for at least half an hour, Gresham turned to Ida.

“So you really got away from home, Ida.”

“Yes, after frightful rows.”

"And how are you getting along; about work, I mean."

"Not too well; I got one job last week."

"What sort of stuff are you best at?"

"Oh, I can do the conventional ad stuff with the rest of them."

"What's your colour like?"

"Don't ask me; pretty rotten, I suppose."

"I'd like to see some. The Century Theatre needs some small colour panels. . . ."

Bidding for favours? Of course not; a kind elder giving intelligent youth a trifle of help. Ida turned her smoothly modelled face up to him trustfully. She could trust it to a close inspection of its finished pallor, the fascinating tint of her eyelids, the secret vitality of her shy half smile. . . .

Trixy's long nose assisted her drooping eyelids to exude disdain at the back of Gresham's head, directed at her. It disdained equally an uproar on culture values going on at her other side. That left only Floyd and Captain Gruntle as subjectives to the art of sorceress. Those two were well away in Captain Gruntle's corner, talking in the gruff undertones of one ultra male to another. Strong men talk like that;—bluff, rough, hard-headed men who may have heard that such things as girls exist but have not otherwise bothered to verify the fact.

Trixy lit a fresh cigarette and strolled to the table, where she poured herself a nobbler of whisky and drained it without a blink. Captain Gruntle saw her do it, transfixed with alarm. Floyd did not, but found her at his elbow, and gave a slight jump, which sent him outside to examine the weather. The coward, to leave a fellow strong man to his doom. Captain

Gruntle was walled in back and sides, and Trixy strolled quite close to him and examined him with a quietly ruthless eye from the distance of three inches. That was the length of his pipe; he had that much protection.

"You interest me," said Trixy. "Your face is the convex satanic. I am convinced that you have done brutal deeds."

Captain Gruntle puffed out clouds of smoke, both to hide behind, and to asphyxiate Trixy. But Trixy was used to smoke; she lived in it. Calmly scrutinizing Captain Gruntle through the noxious fumes of his pipe, she said,

"I am strongly attracted to brutal men. . You attract me. You are an antidote to these wr-ret-t-tched specimens of over civilized poodles we have here."

Captain Gruntle got that. He could be heard sputtering, "Dog whip, by gad! take the hide off 'em. . ."

"I, also, am a sadist; I frequently dream of lashing slaves to death. Tell me of the most brutal deed you ever performed. . . ."

Floyd sheared off from there; it was indecent to stand and listen to the exposures now about to be extorted from Captain Gruntle. The row over culture values had set Wally again item jabbing with Wilkins and Triplet contesting amendments. They had a bottle of whisky in their corner, which helped to keep them there. Something tugged at Floyd's coat, and he gave another little jump, and sheared off from there too. Edna stared about to account for his vanishing. She had been sitting there in a state of contented curvature of the spine, but now an expression of acute agony convulsed her face, as if the floor had suddenly run

a tack into her. She came up from it by a remarkable series of undulations and hung herself over Gresham.

"God! Can't you DO something," she wailed.

"Why,—yes,—of course," said Gresham, startled. "What do you propose?"

"Dance, of course," said Edna scornfully.

"What do you say, Ida?"

"Can we?"

Gresham got up, with Edna attached. Floyd was bending at his box of bottles, and as his back was the right height Gresham hung Edna over it. "We're going to have a dance, Bill, and that's your partner," he said.

Floyd gave him a look of hate, dancing already to maintain his equilibrium with a lizard. Ida came to help Gresham sort out Floyd's records, which were bundled anyhow into a deal box. "Bill affects bad taste in art; he's sure to have jazz," said Gresham.

"Here's a fox trot," said Ida, and put it on, while Gresham wound the gramophone. Floyd was saying in the swift undertones of terror, "Absurd! No! Impossible:—I can't dance,—never have danced. My good girl, leave go. I can't dance—won't dance——"

But Edna was no longer a lizard. She had acquired a steel spring backbone and the soul of a Roman Empress, and at the first blast of the gramophone she ran Floyd across the floor like a policeman running in a drunk. "Walk!" she was hissing, "Walk, walk, walk,—any fool can walk——"

Floyd walked; he had to to escape being strangled. He walked like a bear in the grip of an anaconda. He walked with a maddened eye imploring rescue. He walked as men in nightmare walk exposed to awful

shames. And all the while he walked he panted, "Stop,—enough,—My God! enough:—"

Gresham and Ida clicked together, and Gresham knew instantly that jazz came straight from Olympus to assuage the discontents of marriage and the disgraces of middle age. There was plenty of floor space and no wife or daughter present and he breathed Ida in to sigh her out and breathe her in again and say, "This is wonderful, Ida;—the very thing I needed. If you only knew how depressed I've been. . . ."

Trixy had got Captain Gruntle so far out from behind his pipe that he was beer gassing fiercely ". . . No half measures, by Gad! Give me charge of this place for two days and I'd have these rats of communists jumping to attention or I'd bump the scum off in squads. Go on or go under, by thunder. Drive 'em, by George, drive 'em like sheep or shoot 'em like dogs. . . ."

Trixy glanced at two dance couples and turned another brand of calm ruthlessness on Captain Gruntle.

"You dance, of course," she said.

"Dance! ME!!!" exploded Captain Gruntle.

But Trixy put him straightway out of action by embracing him. She took his hand and leaned on his shoulder and said firmly, "Your arm round me."

Captain Gruntle's arm came round her; that was his last sentient act. His eye was transfixed with the ghastly expression of one whose last moment of consciousness has been rushed by a horrible threat. He retained his pipe, but that was the rigor mortis of shock. Elsewise, his actions were the phenomena of a subject under hypnosis.

Trixy moved briskly backwards and Captain Gruntle came briskly forward. She stopped there to say, "You

will walk as I count two. One for the right foot and two for the left. ONE—TWO——”

Captain Gruntle one twoed; up the room forward and down the room backward. In a series of little back leaps. The expression of his eye never faltered for a second; transfixed in horror. Even if he could have achieved consciousness he could not have saved himself by spitting in Trixy's eye, because he had no breath to spit with.

Wally and Wilkins and Triplet had now got their propaganda in order and turned to discover a most unseemly performance by three middle aged gay dogs. Charged with the rectitude of high endeavour, Wally's eye sternly questioned his father's style as a dancer. It did things to the music that were not there, posing the embrace of a syncopation to the time space of four beats that should have been done in one, and making Italian Primitive curves out of Anglo Saxon attitudes, and talking into its partner's face, which was turned up to be talked into. . . .

But the gramophone stopped there and Captain Gruntle fell down. Floyd staggered, but found himself upright and still alive. Trixy pulled Captain Gruntle up and led him to the table and poured him a whisky, which she held to his lips. That brought Captain Gruntle back to consciousness. He grabbed the glass and gulped down the whisky and looked round with an astounded expression. Edna lugged Floyd to the table, and he came, mopping his brow. She was again a lizard limply clinging, and she said with intense affection to Floyd, “Do get me a spot, old sport.”

It appeared to be a fixation of Edna's that she could not get a spot for herself; somebody had to get it

for her. Floyd got it, and she touched his lips with the rim of the glass before putting it to her own; a little by-play that combined the graces of two hobbies in one. But Captain Gruntle tapped him resolutely for attention.

"What about that, Floyd? Fine performance, eh, what? Took it in one stride, by Gad."

Floyd was astounded; Captain Gruntle was blown up with conceit.

"Tut, tut, Gruntle, an awful sensation," he protested. "Thoroughly indecent, too."

"That's why you like it, don't you, old sport," said Edna, playing with Floyd's nose.

In a bluff manly way, Floyd brushed her off his nose. At the same time, a novelty was insidiously at work on him. An undeniable tribute, this being limply looped about by Edna. . . .

A High Proposal was interfering with the gramophone, where Wally was demanding attention from his father, so Trixy took her male analysis stand three inches from Captain Gruntle and said, "As a sailor, you represent the artist man of action. Soldiers are the lowest norm of sadism. Collective blood lust; one dismisses them as the organised herd. But the sailor stands alone. Isolated in the crude forces of nature, he drives his creatures like a fiend."

That got Captain Gruntle.

"By Gad, now,—I could tell you—In my 'prentice days I've shipped out of 'Frisco with a crew of gaol birds; Liverpool packet rats lambs to 'em, by gad. Blacklegs and hobos; any scum the crimps gave us. Only way to handle 'em was to manhandle 'em. . . ."

Wally had refused to be fubbed off by Gresham's

"Hang it, Wally, there's a time for everything. Let's have a little light nonsense; come and dance. . ."

"Look here, dad, I only want to get one point fixed. Don't want to tie you to any arrangement, but suppose I convince you that I've got a sound paying investment in this review, would you be prepared to back it?"

"Wally, a review can't be a sound paying investment."

"This one will be. That's just it. If you'll only listen a moment——"

"Oh, I know all that, Wally."

"But you don't. This is quite a——"

"Leave it till Monday; come and have a talk with me at the office."

Wally knew better than to leave it to the office; a pose of generosity can only be effectively blackmailed before an audience.

"But it only means five minutes' talk. Cut the expenses down to bed rock. It won't cost a cent to contributors; we'll write the whole thing ourselves. If you don't feel like putting up a lump sum, would you agree to guarantee the printer's bill. . . ."

Ida had been sidling about the gramophone, setting the disc spinning, stopping it, restarting it. Now she let it run and applied the needle.

Tar-r-rump—Pom—BANG!—

Gresham gave Wally a friendly nod, which deferred talk to noise. Quite by chance, he found Ida at his elbow. "Feel like a dance," he asked politely. Ida didn't mind a dance——

"That was clever of you, Ida," said Gresham in her ear, "Saved me just in time. But I fear Wally will get me yet. . . ."

Floyd and Captain Gruntle were being towed into

action too. Floyd put up a feeble-minded resistance in deference to the ignominy of now wanting to dance and feeling as big a fool as Captain Gruntle looked. Awful, to have that example before one of what megalomania could do to a man in five minutes. Still, there was something to be said for those poor girls. They had stood Wally and Wilkins and Triplet for hours and hours. . . .

Floyd's camp broke into two camps there; austere youth and frivolous age. Wally's camp got into its corner and ignored the indecencies going on behind its back. They did not shout, except when a trifling lapse into argument required emphasis. Aware of high endeavour in a futile world, their style was concise, resolute, disillusioned. Also a little inarticulate; they drank a lot; the dignity of their status required it.

Gresham drank a good deal too. He felt slightly foolish by Wally's rejection of his foolery till he had drunk enough not to care how he felt. He had thrown off his coat and between dances he discussed Ida's art and her future and her personality and her appearance with an air of having permanently taken over the management of these matters. He also avoided consorting with what was now distinctively the Gruntle group:—there are limits to which middle aged adolescence wishes to inspect an example of itself.

No question but that sorcery had been practiced on Captain Gruntle, who was exploding arrogance and power and the pride of a dangerous homicidalist all over the place. He strutted and skipped and pouted up in front and told awful things about himself. He pulled up his trousers to show Trixy where a mad sailor had bitten him in the leg, and he pulled up his shirt so that she could examine the place where

a dago had knifed him in the back. He did feats of strength with a chair and hit himself a stunning clout on the head with it, and he showed how a proper knowledge of sailor knots might allow a man to be seemingly trussed up like a fowl and yet undo himself with wizard ease, and he rolled on the floor like a man fighting with snakes in performing this feat, and Trixy brooded over him as once dark queens looked on at barbarous kings who have been brought to their courts to be analysed, and used, and awarded a place in the long line of used up retainers.

Floyd was not at all easy about this. He became bluffer and gruffer the drunker he got, and at intervals he detached Edna and put her down somewhere in a semi-soluble state, in which she remained contentedly till the floor stuck a tack in her, and put her into action again.

Uncle Buncler had given the whole thing up. Never had he conceived that Floyd could so forget himself. Indignity had been done him also; Captain Gruntle had bounded on his fat back, and he had come out from under the cupboard in a frenzy and gone to earth behind a roll of bedding, and when his reflections assured him that such things could not be, he came out and panted horror at the evidence before his eyes and went to earth again.

Wilkins precipitated the row——

There was no hint of a row anywhere, yet it erupted out of a dance as the logical statement of an offence. Gresham was dancing with his forehead against Ida's; a pose that imposes trance motives on the motions of the legs, and he awoke to a thump in the back. That was Floyd colliding with him. Then BUMP!—an impact that jarred the floor boards. Captain Gruntle

had gone down, and Wilkins was posed above him, about to murder Trixy too.

"Bitch! Pot bellied old bastard!" he yelled.

Trixy forgot that she was a sorceress and became a really dangerous woman. She gave Wilkins a slap in the chaps and a push in the stomach that sent him doing dancing exercises on Captain Gruntle. "Talk to ME, you drivelling lout," she said.

Gresham was still confounded by a drama of jealousy at crisis when he found Wally at his elbow saying viciously, "That's right; rub it in. Show how easy it is for a man with money to buy a woman."

Gresham still had an arm round Ida and he gaped at Wally, whose eyes were blazing with fury while his voice was knife-edged with a rejection of it.

"Put the accent on the coin," he jeered. "It's the key to good conscience and women too. You can afford to make a joke of values, after selling bum architecture to Babbitt for twenty years and making the cow pay for it. Quite right, too."

"Don't be an ass, Wally."

"That's my trade mark; you're the wise man. I ought to know; I've paid the price of your damned wisdom. Hell of a lot your generation's done for mine, hasn't it? You've clogged the blasted country with your frustrations and left us a rubbish heap to destroy before we can think of creating. That's your gift to us. Oh yes, and two quid a week. I forgot that; thanks——"

Gresham, quite sober, was getting into his coat. His face was as sharp edged as Wally's, and he repressed speech as viciously as Wally let it out. Everybody in the room looked at him; it was the most unpleasant experience of his life.

"Going, are you?" said Wally. "That's right, run away. I've a few more things to say to you but I don't suppose you want to hear them. And take that bitch with you while you are about it."

Gresham was at the door, but he stopped and looked at Ida. Quite undisturbed, she picked up her hat and walked across to him and they went out to the car. Almost at once, it seemed to Gresham, a riot blew the camp up.

With Ida beside him he turned the car on a swerve that just missed the edge of the road and went down it at a pace set by his fury with Wally and a belittling exit. But he said nothing till he shot down the incline to the main road, and there let it out in a burst of speed and temper.

"My God! isn't it simply bloody the way my kids make a fool of me before a crowd?"

"They don't make a fool of *you*," said Ida soothingly.

"I feel a fool. I hate emotion in public and they don't care a damn for it. And good Lord! that drivell of Wally's—fubbing his own muddle over work off on me. Why the deuce can't he say straight out he hates the struggle to get work started and intends to loaf. It's his own affair; I don't care a damn whether he works or whether he doesn't. . . ."

Ida stroked his arm, consoling his hard lot, and consolation took its reward by turning to kiss her. A hasty kiss, because he was steering round a bend in the road. More than consoled, he put an arm round her.

"After all, I don't blame Wally; you are a dear thing, Ida."

From that kiss Ida emerged to say "No, you're wrong there; Wally's not angry about this."

"You think so?"

"Yes, he doesn't really care for me or any girl. He makes a fuss over a girl, but it's only to try and convince himself that he's in love."

"I think you are right; yes; I've noticed that his love affairs crash almost before they've begun. . . ."

They discussed Wally with a consciousness of not only being just but also kind to him. Gresham was willing to indulge benevolence to Wally, with Ida cuddled against him. He found it pleasing that Wally did not really care for girls. . . .

That drive took them to Milson's Point and across the harbour in the punt and so up Macquarrie Street to Darlinghurst. The stir of talk and drink and drama kept Gresham from the deadly arithmetic of middle aged indecisions over the clasp of Ida's soft body and the easy return of her kisses, which were of an artistry that made him believe himself really worthy of them, and when they reached Kings Cross and Ida's flat he was astonished at a passage that also arrived there with his assurance intact and no premeditations to bother about.

"A quarter to three," he said, glancing at his watch, "That was the nicest drive I ever had, Ida."

Ida had the good taste to let the drive finish on that accent and stepped down to close the door and say across it, "I loved it too."

Noble generous adorable girl. . . .

"And when can I come and see your work, Ida?"

"Whenever you like."

"Suppose you meet me at the Australia for tea at

half past three on Wednesday; we can come out after and see it."

"Thanks."

She touched his hand and walked across to the flats and Gresham got off in a glow that lasted him back to Milsons Point. Then he began to do sums. . . .

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TOLERANCE for Wally petered out with Gresham's arrival at the office on Monday morning. Temper was necessary to mask an attack on uneasiness:—if Wally insisted on maintaining that absurd attitude of rancour. . . .

"Wally been in yet?" he asked Floyd.

"No, damn him."

Floyd had mislaid his grin that morning. He scratched the place where it ought to have been, and scowled at Gresham, as the prime author of Wally's being.

"D'you know what those young blighters did after you left? Had a blazing row with the other two wenches and cleared out. Left Gruntle and me with them on our hands."

"You didn't mind that."

"Mind! Never was in such a ghastly position. One was too tight to go and the other refused to, even if I could have got a taxi. First time Gruntle's spent the night out of his house for ten years. By George, that man's in a bad way. He crawled out in the dawn absolutely demented between skite and funk. Tottered off home like a man going to his death. Seen his wife, haven't you? Fourteen stone and wears a moustache. Don't know what she did to him; something worse than death. He refused to speak of it. Yes, he came back that very afternoon. Would you believe it; came slinking back with his eyes popping

and beads of terror on his brow. That wench with the drugged eyelids has done for him. Never saw such an exhibition, with her looking at Gruntle like a doped vampire and Gruntle bragging and blustering and every now and then giving a leap of terror for fear his wife might come stalking him. Heard him tell the wench he'd endured twenty years martyrdom. . . . It's got him. An awful example of what can happen to a man who gets a dose of adolescence at the wrong end of life."

"Yes, very instructive. Good thing for you that you are safe, Bill. Of course you got rid of your affair without difficulty."

"Who! me:—I didn't try to; she's down there yet."

"What!"

Floyd confessed to the stigmata of funk by suddenly gritting his teeth.

"She can dam' well stay there," he said. "There's enough booze to last her for three days. When she's finished that she'll have to come out to save herself from dying of thirst. I don't intend to go back there for a month, anyway."

"Wise man. Is Gruntle down there with his lady too?"

"No, she had to come to town this morning. And that condemned fool Gruntle came bolting round at eight o'clock to go with her. He's doomed."

Floyd seemed to extract a certain solace from the spectacle of Captain Gruntle's dementia. He went back to his room muttering, "Serve him right. Serve any middle aged ass right who lets a wench throw him off his balance. . . ."

Though rejecting identification under that heading, Gresham preferred to delete the vacillations of the

parent from those of the lover by getting out of the office. He had a great reluctance to meeting Wally just then.

Just then Wally was rejecting the febrile disruptions of love as a motive for rejecting a father. He was having a row with Wilkins about it. They stood dispectically outside a certain pub in Phillip Street which was the gravitating center of their circle, and they had not breakfasted, nor had the communism of booze brought along a friend with money to buy them a drink.

"But, damn it, you can cut the old man without having a row with his money," Wilkins pointed out.

"I won't touch a penny of his damn money. He can go to hell. I've settled finally and completely with him. If he'd been a decent sort of father he'd have either staked me in a good living or told me to go to blazes. As it is, he's squashed me with his nice easy manner and his damned two quid a week."

"All I say is, why chuck away two quid this week when you'll only go back for it next week."

"Will I? You think this is only talk?"

"I bloody well know it is."

Encompassed by frustrations fore and aft, Wally hurled friendship on the rubbish heap too.

"Go to hell,—I'm sick of the whole push of you. . . ."

He strode at speed straight round into Castlereagh Street and into a tall building that looked like an insurance office that had got religious mania, and had broken out into Gothic warts and stained glass windows, but was in fact, a newspaper office. Incarcerated in a cell high up in this sacred edifice Wally found a sub editor, and said to him firmly, "I want a job."

Without looking up from a proof the sub editor said finally, "You won't get it here. Clear out; I'm busy."

Wally sat down, with the air of intending to spend a week there if necessary. "I'm not looking for a permanent job. I want one that will last long enough for a steerage passage to London. Come on; you know anything that's going——"

"There isn't a job on any paper in Sydney; as it is, they're all working on half staffs and half salaries."

"Well, put me onto some publicity stuff."

"The only thing going that way that I know of is that old Bill Mallumpy M. P. wants an autobiography. The old blighter won't pay more than fifty quid for it."

"I'll take it; give me a note to him. . . ."

By evening Wally had done a lot of things. He had interviewed old Bill Mallumpy and ratified the rotten bargain to whitewash the dull record of jobbery that is the life of any politician. He had jotted notes for its first chapter, collected a mass of turgid documents and newspaper cuttings, pawned his gramophone, bought a wad of typing paper, and bolted a meat pie, all at white hot speed. Now he was bolting back to his flat to hammer hell out of a father on a typewriter.

What time that father was leaning from a window of his office to mark certain infirmities of resolution in his partner's departure. Possibly he desired a precedent in reference to a few of his own. Floyd had a flat at Rose Bay, and usually walked to King Street for his tram, but tonight he walked ten paces in that direction and pulled up. Deeply meditating, he walked ten paces back, paused; scratched his chin; scratched his neck; scratched his leg. Itches of inde-

cision on a crucial indecision. As if that had suddenly kicked him behind he bolted for Circular Quay.

"I thought so," said Gresham.

Which did not really solve a precedent of conduct for himself. It might have seemed that resolution in a son displaced it in a father, for where Gresham now wobbled morally all over the place in quest of a conviction that life began again at a new love adventure, Wally masterfully commanded its other factor of work by ejecting Wilkins and Triplet and everybody else from his flat that he might hammer undisturbed at the disgusting non-existence of Bill Mallumpy.

Gresham at least went to his tailor's and ordered a light grey suit with socks and tie to match. Most quests of the spirit begin at a tailor's shop, though a statement that life is about to be decorated by the graces is not a wise one to advertise in the home. Gresham might have bought a dozen suits without comment from Baby, but *that* suit was awarded a certain glance at the breakfast table which made him anxious to hide as much as possible of it behind the morning paper.

It served as an optical focus for domestic disruption, which just then was wandering for a specified signal of treachery to glance at. Now the base telepathic inductions of woman proposed to find one in that suit. . . .

He met Ida at the Australia Winter Garden quite glazed with suavity at a pleasant little meeting of no particular significance to either of them. There is only one sum to be done in a Winter Garden, and that is done for you by other people, who come there to detect what everybody else is doing there except themselves. Everybody could see at a glance what Gresham

was doing there with Ida; no girl makes a mistake in giving *that* motive to the world. The pose of the head does it, turned with quiet attention to a frankly futile exhibition of male conversation; a pose which excludes attention to all save him.

They were late in getting to Ida's little flat, which was the abode of two girls who confound the conventions of a home with the necessity of working in a confined space. The table was littered with drawing materials and piles of papers and drawings were dumped about everywhere.

"Oh, what a mess," said Ida, annoyed. "Trixy promised to tidy up before she left. We were working on a job, you see, and——"

"It's very nice; I like to see a work room. That's a good head;——whose is it?"

"Oh, that's one of Trixy's; these are some of mine. . . ."

Half an hour later Gresham was still industriously going through the pile of drawings on his knees. The graciousness of a patron to the arts allowed him to befog other proposals for being in that small flat alone with Ida, who sat beside him on the couch listening gravely to his gabble. He had not kissed her, confused for a precedent that belonged to a row with Wally, and as yet was not sure of one on his own account.

". . . . Yes, your colour sense is excellent, Ida. Here and there your drawing could be stronger, but you'll soon conquer that. I'm quite delighted with your work. And about those panels. They need to be quite formal, you know. I think perhaps I'd best rough out a general scheme of design and you can

try it out in colour. Suppose you do one panel first as a sample. . . .”

He kept that up, going back over the drawings for fresh subject matter, with Ida leaning a little against his shoulder, so that she could inspect it too.

“It’s awfully good of you,” she said. “You aren’t doing this only because you like me, are you?”

“Good Lord, no, Ida, your work is excellent—excellent——”

But he had to confirm her admission that he liked her, which could only be done by kissing her. By turning his head he reached her lips.

The radiations of a kiss are defined by its length, and when that kiss had disposed of its statement as a kiss it went on being a lot of other things. To support them, Gresham put his arm round Ida, who slacked against him and closed her eyes. Having got into a pose which sustained initiative by suspending it, Gresham had either to affirm initiative or go on suspending it. An excess of tact on both sides, which gave him a desperate sum to do, with dusk falling and that interminable kiss posed on a small but sufficient couch. . . .

The pile of drawings on his knee came suddenly to his rescue by sliding off on the floor. Ida murmured, “Don’t bother,” but he insisted on gathering them up and putting them in order. That allowed him to glance at his watch and say impatiently, “Too bad; I’ve got a dinner appointment. . . .”

Ida saw him submissively to the door, with Gresham protesting at the nuisance of affairs. “I’ll let you have the sizes and design of those panels at once, Ida. And give me a ring as soon as you’ve got something done.

And will you come and have dinner with me in town one night soon?"

"I'd love to," said Ida, with a faint flatness of tone in a generous admission.

"I hate leaving you," said Gresham with sudden fervour.

He hated leaving her because he did not have to. There was no dinner appointment, and having ejected that confession of funk at himself he had to face it. He had to face the crude fact that he was in a state of great mental confusion over the noble generosity with which destiny was answering his prayer for one last love adventure without waiting to find out whether he was able to sustain its rôle of lover. With that kiss now staged as a cue for action he was beset by an awful rush of doubts.

That kiss!—the agitation of his mind insisted on muddling itself over the texture and inspiration of that kiss, and he confounded himself with dictionary definitions to try and find out what he ought to have done about it.

". . . I wonder if she really expected me to. No, I don't believe she did. But that kiss:—it offered everything. No, I'm wrong; it merely refused nothing. No:—the assumption behind it was that everything was nothing. That meant me too. But hang it, she couldn't kiss me like that unless she meant something. . . . What would that amount to for her? A casual embrace! But for me—I wish she wasn't so attractive; then it wouldn't matter whether she meant it or not. But she's lovely:—hell! I could never live up to that kiss. . . ."

A footnote to these maunderings insisted on presenting itself; "Of course, I'm useful to her," and that

depressed him more than his alarms for the potency of a middle aged lover.

He did not dine in town that night and so arrived home when dinner was over, which was a mistake, as admitting that a mental disturbance from the normal had muddled its routine. It was a mistake under any terms bringing a disturbance of that sort home for the telepathic treacheries of a wife to get busy with. His mask was quite in order, and it overlooked Baby while saying in a tone of conciliation to the housemaid, "No, don't set the table, just send something on a tray to my room," which Baby rejected with a faint shrug while turning her back on him.

A tone of conciliation:—impossible to correct these involuntary concessions to guilt. And why a concession to guilt unless you are anxious to be found out before it is too late?

He was carpet pattern treading about his room an hour later when he heard Nina come into the courtyard and say at her mother's bedroom door, "Jim's here."

Gresham listened hard to catch Baby's answer, but only heard its tone of impatience. "Oh well then, don't," he heard Nina say also with impatience as she went back to the house.

A theory of reprisals gave Gresham an annoying time trying to insist that this little passage was a transparent pretense that there was no excuse for them.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NINA went slowly back to the passage automatically counting her steps. She was very reluctant to see Jim, since she had seen him only once after leaving his room that morning and had dodged speaking to him. She had glimpsed him as he came out of the Key Heights Hotel and had crossed the road to her car, but the back of her head knew that he stood there waiting for her to turn round and acknowledge the sneaking pretence that avoided him. She did not turn round, but hopped into the car and let it run away with her. . . .

When she opened the door Jim was moving restlessly about the room and he turned on her instantly the suspense of his nerves. His eyes were angry and bloodshot and the muscles of his face twitched; the mask of a subjective lover had altogether slipped.

“Mum’s lying down, Jim——”

“Damn your mother; I never came to see her.”

He was furious at this transparent evasion of his vast emotion on her account, and caught her roughly by the arm.

“What do you mean by putting this across me?”

The light behind his eyes alarmed Nina and she said hurriedly, “Don’t make a scene here, Jim.”

“Come outside then.”

She resisted but he hauled her out to the verandah and down to the garden, where he tugged her into his arms and held her.

"Now are you going to keep up the damned lie that I mean nothing to you?"

"But Jim——"

"I love you and you treat me like this."

"Like what?"

"Like hell!—like dirt."

"I don't. And how can you talk about loving me. You don't love any girl,—any girl does for you."

"I'm sick of that damned lie. I know now that I never loved any girl but you. I haven't stopped thinking about you a second since you left me. Why did you leave me like that, after telling me that you loved me?"

"I didn't,—I——"

"You did. Innocence with its eyes closed won't work with me. You know damned well that you took me because you wanted me. Now I want you; I'll have you too."

"Jim, you're hurting me."

"What's that to the way you've hurt me? You pulled me back to life and gave me the only thing worth living for and now you want to sling me on the rubbish heap. I won't take it from you. If I can't have you I'll kill you."

"How can you talk such rot."

"I'm not talking; I mean it."

In the dark his eyes seemed to flicker light and frightened Nina. He did mean it; she understood that much of an obsession that wanted her only for what it could not get; a release from itself. She was muddled, too, by a claim to possess her that had given her also possession of herself. His violence quelled and dominated her and at her panicky impulse to struggle free from it he tossed her off her balance and held

her with one arm while his hand took her by the throat.

"Now do you think I mean it?" he asked viciously.

By a protective impulse that she did not sanction Nina went suddenly limp in his arms. She could not speak, by the paralysis of fear at that grip on her throat. All she thought was, "Let him have his own way. . . ."

For a space Jim held her, staring darkly down into her face. He shook her impatiently, demanding initiative from her at a crisis that had fallen on himself. A suspended emotion dammed up by liquor had to find an outlet, and there was only one release for that:—to kill a sadistic image of itself.

"Why don't you speak?" he exclaimed furiously.

"I can't—my throat——"

His hand relaxed and Nina gasped for breath, and lay with her face against him to recover. Her arm came up and took him cajolingly around the neck. By the conflict of emotion set up by him she did not know whether the gesture wished to submit to him or to defeat him. Confused by it, he held her off to peer into her face.

"Well?" he asked.

"What do you want me to say, Jim?"

"That you love me; that you'll take me."

"I love you—I'll take you."

He brought her slowly upright and released his hold of her, but they remained close together, staring into the dim inscrutable masks of two unknown faces. Both were bemused by an act of submission that had destroyed the emotional bridge between them.

"Do you mean this, Nina?"

Jim's voice had lost its resonance and he made that uncertain gesture which wiped his brow with the back

of his hand, and Nina was suddenly rushed with the discovery of why motivity had failed him. She thrust him off with a hysterical laugh.

"Of course I mean it:—just as much as you do."

She was angry now, aware that the collapse of his spirit rejected her by the greater need to be rejected by her. A last excuse to reject himself.

"You!—No woman means anything to you;—you only want them to get away from yourself. I don't want you;—I don't want a man who only wants to kill a woman to get rid of himself——"

But at the spiritless appeal of his spirit she relented as suddenly and put a hand to his face.

"I'm sorry, Jim,—I don't want to hurt you. I don't mean anything to you but you'll always mean a lot to me."

He almost took her in his arms and then pushed her roughly off to combat a stultified emotion that wished to weep.

"Damn your pity:—I owe you a hell of a lot, don't I? You saved my damned life."

He turned and walked off without another glance at her, leaving her with a flurried impulse, which she mistook for alarm on his account. A threat to his unstable hold on the little happiness of life. . . .

It alarmed a responsive emotion on her own account, which left her standing there, listening to the dying passage of his footsteps in the darkness.

Troubled, Nina went slowly back to the front room, but the sliding images of uneasiness for Jim petered out and forgot him, yet left her still uneasy. She needed now a return for all that emotion which had used him and got rid of him but had not thereby got rid of itself. . . .

Walking with precise steps, and counting them, she went down the passage. If she reached the telephone in ten steps——

She reached it in thirteen; an evil number. But she picked up the directory and found a number and reached for the receiver without taking it. Omens are very disturbing on a disturbed state of emotion. One more chance; if she reached the front door in fourteen steps! She reached it in thirteen. . . .

Enough of omens. She spent a long time over her toilet the next afternoon before assuring herself that she looked very self possessed in a flowered voile frock and a little scarlet hat framing the bird's wing sheen of her polished black hair and the dusky gold of her skin. Her light eyes were very brilliant in that setting and she belied a hint of alarm in them by tossing a careless glance at the mirror which said, "Pooh! a mere trifle; I know how to manage these things. . . ."

Manly beach was as brilliant as Nina when she turned the two seater in to watch the crowd of surfers, the idlers on the sand and the strollers on the esplanade. She covered all points with swift intent glances before assuring herself that any large alert crisp haired presence was not Drake.

On an afternoon like this he must be out of doors if he was in Manly and she backed the car out presently and drove on slowly, turning into the Corso to the harbour side and back again, continuing to make that round. Having disposed of omens she was quite sure of meeting him somewhere on it. . . .

By half past four she was drawn up near the Ferry landing, frowning at a most unnecessary vigil. She had repeated all the things she intended to say to

Drake so often that they took possession of her mind like an idiotic song and went on repeating themselves. And when she did see him at last she was shot with such a perturbation that she forgot every one of them.

Drake was crossing from the ferry and she turned the car up the Corso to turn again and meet him coming down. Her face was set for a bright interchange of greetings and she drove close to the curb so that he could not miss seeing her.

He missed her completely, striding along with his rams-horned eyebrows contracted on a mood of self communion that rejected the nuisance of looking at human beings just then, and Nina speeded up in great alarm to make the turn and catch him again before he reached his flats.

She caught him just in time. He stared at her a moment before his detachment discovered who she was and then he did a damnable thing. He merely waved a hand at her with a hitch of one shoulder and turned into his flat.

Anticlimax always overdoes these things. Nina had swung round that detestable Corso and was half way out of Manly before her confusion allowed her to discover that she had been vilely and basely dismissed. Dismissed as a trivial little fool not worth bothering about any longer. She kept that up as fury till she nearly wept and was jerked back to fury to avert that disgrace. Execrable Drake! Her only hope of ever regaining self respect was to meet him just once again and dismiss him with crushing insolence for ever. . . .

At half past nine Nina sneaked out to the garage and once more took the terrible road to Manly. She had suffered such an intolerable interlude that the unendurable could only be endured by arriving at a crisis

of unendurability. It was a distracted drive because she could not fix her mind on a single thing to say to Drake. Protective muddle, to avert the malice of anticlimax. It kept her head whizzing till she parked her car outside Drake's flats, scooted in, found his door and jammed the bell. Then her mind went perfectly blank.

Drake's measured tread reached the door, which he opened with a frown at being disturbed. At the sight of Nina his eyebrows shot up and stayed up. Both stared; incapable of finding words for the only question to be asked. Then Nina both asked and answered it without her own consent.

"You utter beast, Dinkie," she wailed, and grabbed at him to weep on his magnificent chest. In a flutter of concern Drake got her inside and closed the door. . . .

And he never once thought of trying to find out if Nina was only a pretty brown girl from an ocean beach. He forgot all about his anthropological device of submerging the sport in the species and remaining safe as an onlooker of both. He did not try to remain safe at all, but saturated himself in the elixir of Nina's youth and got quite drunk on it.

And Nina demolished emotional surrender and feminine dominance by becoming both aspects of herself at a stroke. She did not think about herself as something to be thought about any more than Drake did; not for a couple of hours, anyhow.

A couple of hours later she sat on his knees and reclined contentedly on his chest, while Drake tickled his fine long nose in her thick scented hair, and sniffed delicately its aroma of Nina. He was saying.

". . . I don't believe in complicating action by investigating motives, Nina. Throw motives to the devil

and rely on action and you can't go wrong. I don't intend to stay in this country and I don't intend to lose you. Action is obvious; you come with me."

"I suppose so," murmured Nina.

"Then that's settled."

"No, don't let us bother to settle things like that. Let me kiss your ear."

Drake presented his ear and then displaced it for his lips, and that deferred motives to action for another interlude. But the anthropologist sneaked a motive in there to ask.

"Tell me, Nina, why did you run away from me that night?"

"Oh, that:—it was nothing——"

"You got a telephone call and then bolted. Who did you run away to? Ronny?"

"That idiot! Of course not."

"What idiot, then?"

"Nobody. At least, I did not go to see anybody——"

"But you saw him, all the same. And then you left him to come running back to me. Now why?"

Nina sat up to study him seriously. His eyes were intent and wished to get at the secrets behind her mask of dusky gold. She bent down to close them with two tender kisses, saying, "Don't ask silly questions, Dinkie. If I hadn't run away from you that night I never would have found my way back to you."

She refused to enlarge on that; it was very soothing to know that Drake suffered from jealousy.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AT the breakfast table Gresham found himself studying certain affectations of behaviour in Nina. She poured tea but forgot to pass it; she recalled tea and passed it as a bright inspiration. She put her finger tips together and smiled gently at them, as if she reproved them, but was very very fond of them. When she remembered to eat it was as an act of graciousness not to herself, but to eggs and bacon.

Benevolence is admittedly an effort to propitiate malevolence on our own account. Gresham discovered that Jerry, too, exhibited the little antics of gesture that confess a secret preoccupation. He scrambled through his food, disliking it, and gave over eating to go through his pockets in a hurry and identify some scribbled sheets of MS., which he thrust away to snatch a couple of mouthfuls and gulp down his tea and rise.

"How are you off for materials?" asked Gresham suddenly.

"Materials?"

"Yes. Buy what you need:—I want you to keep up your drawing."

He handed over a pound note, which Jerry took with mumbled thanks. This was gratuitous largesse, as Jerry took what materials he required from his father's store without asking for them. But money is a lovely thing, and he took the note and escaped with it, or from his father, leaving Gresham a little embarrassed at a crude deal in amiable relations. He put up the paper between it and detection by Nina.

But Nina appeared to have given up a theory that life was a process to be detected in others. Instead of going off abruptly from breakfast she sidled round behind Gresham and smoothed her cheek against his hair.

"I like you, dad," she murmured sentimentally.

"Oh!"

"Yes. I just thought I'd mention it."

"Thanks."

Nina gave a satisfied sigh, and patted him reassuringly and went out, leaving him puzzled. Contacts of emotion with Nina usually embarrassed him, but this did not; it was so palpably a piece of intellectual duplicity. In fact, it dismissed him as a subject of emotion.

He loitered in the courtyard over a cigarette, reluctant to admit that his wife's closed bedroom door had anything to do with a desire to get rid of a state of suspense over Ida by terminating a suspended relation with Baby. But he knew Baby; she kept an antagonism alive by refusing to admit its existence. . . .

Irresolution drifted him to the front garden, drawn there by the optimistic racket of a lawn mower. Years of careful top dressing had brought his lawns to a perfect level, and the close packed Buffalo grass cut a crisp clean surface. In the bright morning light it was a lambent green carpet; the sort of thing nature can never do for herself. A live carpet, resilient underfoot. He strolled across to give his gardener some credit for it.

"Grass is looking well, Peter."

"Yessir. That black sand leaf mould makes a lovely dressing. I give it a dash of bone manure. And this here ammonia spray brings out the colour."

"Fine show of Cannas we've got this year. That pale yellow is a beauty."

"Yessir. I swapped our Pink Prides with Bill Quigly for a set of them Yellers. Up to five quid a set his boss paid for them Yellers. . . ."

Gresham looked resolutely at the Cannas, determined to enjoy their beauty. But he was thinking, "Ida can't go on with that job till I finish the designs and I can string them out. . . ."

Poltroon. He went off to the garage and got out his car.

On the Key Heights road he passed Jerry loitering along, head down, kicking at stones and tufts of grass. As the car passed he brisked up and walked with resolution. Perhaps it occurred to him that he was a little late for school that day.

But there was no longer a thrill of adventure over an imposition on the home that had lasted too long. Jerry was calloused to Fortune's favours and resigned to treachery from them. He almost wished to be found out and thereby rid life of one state of suspense.

One! In that privacy of his down in the gully among the blue gums he got out his wad of MS. and began to sweat literary consciousness. No crescendo of the perfect love episode confounded a misuse of synonyms in this novel. Life had ejected fantasy from art; love was now a chaste motive in words for a skepticism of its rewards in life. Squirming in the coils of parenthesis, Jerry wrote—

. . . . "Ah, better to be that man who, scorning to be deluded by the illusions of fame and women, plunges into the struggle for existence that by his art he, while straining every nerve to acquire perfection,

may still scornfully cry 'Bah! I work not for art. I work for gold' ". . . .

Jerry screwed up his shoulders and glanced swiftly behind him.

A still day, with cumulus floating high in a cobalt dome. Sunlight patterned the earth in green and gold. The bluegums had shed their bark and were cool grey columns flicked with silver. All vertical lines image peace; peace images cessation. Jerry stared long down the quiet vista of the gully to convince himself that no evil presence lurked there.

A cloud passed over the sun and washed light and shadow from the earth. He glanced swiftly up at an immense cloud, domed with pinnacles of blinding light. It moved like a solid thing, churning it upon itself with infinitesimal variations of form; stirred in its mass by mysterious forces.

An unbearable suspense, waiting for it to pass and let the sun free again. It passed, and Jerry relaxed a tightening of the scalp and tried to get on with his novel. But security had gone from a dream of isolation. He sat there with a blank mind; thought lost in the maze of parenthesis. That was one way of thinking about Angel.

The truth was he had told the Puncheons that he had left school for good to account for his almost daily presence among them, but even his own assurance that he was a welcome visitor there faltered a little at the possibility of being detected in quite another character. Angel was very confusing over a policy for a perfect love episode in the home. She commanded no precautions against treachery from three brothers and one Pa, though it was true that the male Puncheons never used the front room. It was one of those rooms that

the people design not to be used, with its hard sateen covered chairs and inadequate couch, its piano which nobody played, and its museum exhibits from the nineties of hand painted vases and prints of girls with balloon coiffures and leg-of-mutton sleeves.

A room of endless afternoons. With brothers afield and Pa asleep and Ma pot-clinking in a distant kitchen, Jerry and Angel had it to themselves. Angel made herself comfortable on the couch and Jerry squirmed about its sateen edge, which was always shooting him off onto the floor, as from a greased slide. The conviction that he could not have enough of Angel caused him to groan for a lack of emphasis that would convince Angel, or himself, that he was having enough of her. "How lovely you are, Angel. If you only knew how much I loved you. I love you so much that I—I—I simply love you madly like hell, Angel. . . ."

Hopeless! Words slid off Angel's immaculate calm like a lightweight lover off a sateen covered couch. She was as temperate as a spring dawn, cool as an Undine, calm as Diana. Even clumpings up the passage failed to disturb her, though Jerry leaped at them like a startled rabbit. He always had a book placed on a chair to snatch up for such an emergency. The curse of wooden houses made at least one concession to the clumping of a brother's boots.

Dan Puncheon's boots. Because one Sunday afternoon Dan came up the passage without his boots. A somnolent soggy afternoon, with the house drugged by sun and silence and Sunday's dinner. Pa Puncheon's snores droned through it like the diapason of an organ intoning Peace—Peace. Ed rumbled a basso motive on Pa's theme. Angel was asleep and Jerry

nearly went to sleep too. But for a threat of sliding off the couch he would have slept and been done for. As it was he lobbed soundlessly from the couch to a chair and was reading his book three seconds before Dan stepped suddenly into the room.

If Dan had arranged to see anything in the room his eye confounded him. It went pallid and opaque in his beetling red face because there was nothing to see. Jerry put down his book to say brightly, "Hallo, Dan, did you see that flight of black duck go over a while back: a bonzer shot. . . ."

All the same, bemusing Dan Puncheon's eye failed to remove a suspicion of treachery from his stockinged feet. Of course, he *may* have been merely asleep with his boots off. . . .

Herb was an excellent brother. He put himself out of action as one by crediting Jerry with his own bed time misanthropy about girls. As an off stage lover, Jerry did some languid fruit spraying and manure carting for Herb, and if Angel came to the verandah and called, "Jerry, don't let Herb work you like that; come and talk to me," Herb's sardonic advice was, "Don't you go, Jerry, don't let her make a cat's-paw of you."

But Jerry always went. His side nod at Herb inferred that as a gentleman guest he could hardly pretend to a brother's emancipation too.

As for Ed; no threat by a lover could reach the brother hidden in his hulking great carcass. He had the hibernating powers of a bear and frowns Sunday away on his bed, waking up at intervals to take a swig of beer, which he brought home on Saturday night and hid variously about the premises. If Herb or Dan found one of his caches and rifled it he bellowed mur-

der. Put to great expense over patent medicines, bottles were sacred things to him.

Not fear of brothers, then, kept Jerry practicing fear in a sunlit gully whose bright aisles scouted fear. An alarm of the spirit sought to concrete itself by childish gestures. He found a horse shoe and picked it up, frowning. Propitiations to luck may *not* be answered, but he spat on it and threw it over his head, rigidly forbearing to see it fall. That would ensure bad luck. But it hit a tree trunk and bounced back and he saw it. . . .

Late that afternoon he lagged down on the Puncheon home and found Herb in the stable, sorting chaff sacks. He left that to fill his pipe and contemplate Jerry darkly, as the chosen confidant of dark affairs.

"You heard of Ede Potts going out with anybody lately?" he demanded.

"Me, Herb? No, I haven't heard anything, Herb."

"Don't get me wrong, Jerry. This Ede Potts is a twicer. That's my opinion verified by the facts. Same time, a man's got his dignity to consider. I put it to you. Ede Potts is thick with Angel; you're thick with Angel. Who did Angel tell you Ede went to Hornsby with last Friday?"

Jerry knew that Ede had gone to Hornsby with Dan Puncheon. Therefore he said frankly, "That's not a fair question, Herb; you can't ask a man to make trouble in a friend's family."

Herb nodded significantly. "As I thought," he said. "And if Ede Potts thinks she can put a cow like Dan across me . . ."

He left it there; a dark investigation of feminine provocation on the just antagonisms of two brothers.

Jerry loitered with Herb on the verandah after din-

ner, irritated by the little conventions of the home which might, or might not, let him get away with Angel for an evening walk. Angel could make that so easy. She had only to stroll out hatted to say, "I'm going across to Key Heights, Jerry."

Drifting about the orchard lanes with her lifted half the stress of a love affair from Jerry's mind. Restlessness was appeased by restlessness. The supple undulation of her waist was a muscular cadence to his arm; he had to reach up a little to kiss her beautifully poised face and that charmed an impassioned need for sycophancy to her.

But those strollings had lapsed. Not for any reason; Angel appeared to forget about them. . . .

Tonight, the windows of her room were alight and Jerry itched with impatience to have her come out hatted and say . . . But Herb kept muttering, "What's the good of staying here, Jerry. Come for a stroll. What about going across to the village. Oh, I dunno, sick of those cows. Half a mind to go and have it out with Ede Potts. . . ."

Pa Puncheon trundled forth to take regal possession of his old cane lounge, which jerked a burst of conversation about chairs out of him by sticking a spike of cane in his leg.

"Tut! tut! Why has not this chair been mended? Herbert, why have you not seen to this? A piece of string . . . Chairs are not what they used to be. Now when I was in India! Ah, those were chairs. It was my practice to have myself suspended in a reclining posture by several natives while the carpenter carefully measured my exact position and *fitted the chair to it*. I was the first to invent this system, which spread like wildfire. The Viceroy himself, Lord Dufferin—But

you are not seated, my boy. Take this chair. One should recline after eating. Lord Dufferin himself said to me . . .”

Jerry was cornered. Ed came out to sit on the verandah ledge and slap at a mosquito, which set him booming, “Why ain’t the tanks been kerosened? How many times I got to speak about that. Spoonful per tank. Don’t you know mosquito’s liable set up blood poisonin’. . . .”

Herb only said morosely, “Kerosene your blanky head.” He was not in mood for bellowing. Besides, he was now aware of Dan at his bedroom mirror carefully fitting a red bow tie to a blue striped collar. Three times he adjusted his collar pin to get the tie mathematically correct. . . .

Then Bill Purfroy arrived at his leisurely straddle up the wheel rutted side track, and nodded greetings off to take a seat beside Ed on the verandah. “Happened to be passing,” he said, as explaining away any assumption that he had come there by intention. Ed said, “See they scratched Fly by Night for the Epsom. My opinion is they’re holdin’ him for the Melbourne Cup. Now that’s a horse. . . .”

Jerry’s mind failed to cover ritualisms of sport, which embody the people’s only religious aspiration. Dan Puncheon caught a heresy from his window and stuck his head out to shout, “What you gettin’ at? I had it on the side Tanglefoot can’t do an eighth under twelve. . . .”

He hurried out to put certain laxities of opinion in order, scowled at by Herb, who observed that Dan had his best blue serge suit on. Angel’s door opened on a bright passage of light and lit up Jerry’s mind too. Behind her, the light absorbed her thin frock and un-

dressed her in silhouette. She stood there idly, unaware of a group of men.

Of those, only Jerry was extravagantly aware of her. He slid to the floor saying, "Take my chair, Angel." If she took his chair he would be able to lean against her knees, or in the shadow caress her foot. "Thanks, Jerry," said Angel, and moved across to seat herself beside Bill Purfroy.

Torture! That was the thing Jerry had feared. In a flash he encompassed the unuttered alarms of his spirit; the death of a honeymoon. He squirmed, trying to see if Angel's bare arm touched Bill's, but Pa's shadow fell across them. Bill's head was turned to Ed; he seemed not to know Angel was there.

Pa Puncheon had richly rolled from India to Art. Perhaps there is more ana about art than other subjects; perhaps Pa's ana made a concession to Jerry's practice of art.

". . . There it was, a genuine Madonna by Raphael, guaranteed by the best connoisseurs of Europe. Offered at Christie's for a cool thousand. 'Done,' said my father. 'You've a bargain,' said the critics. 'Wait a bit,' said my father. His eye had noted what every other eye had overlooked; a button in the corner. A button? What of that? Might not a Madonna have a button on her dress? But!!—the button was stamped with the Imperial Eagle. In a trice, my father had the surface painting removed and by Gad, sir . . ."

Pa Puncheon, suspending climax, recalled Jerry's eye from the perfidy of shadows:—

"By Gad, sir, recovered an authentic portrait of Napoleon."

"My word, Mr. Puncheon——"

But Pa arrested amazement and a mad quest of shadows on the crash of anticlimax:—

“Sold it to the French Government for six hundred and fifty thousand francs.”

Agony; the arms *were* touching. “My word, Mr. Puncheon, your father must have had a marvellous eye.”

“An eye like a hawk;—an eye like a gimlet;—an eye—As another instance of the piercing nature of his eye . . .”

But Jerry blanked Pa out of existence there, while his eye lied meek attention to his bulk and listened at its shadow. Angel was saying softly, “Don’t ask me to take you to another dance, Bill.”

“Me, Angel——”

“Well, I wouldn’t like to say you asked me for last Thursday.”

“Well, by jings, Angel, I had a sort of an idea there was a dance on, but I clean forgot Thursday. Funny the tricks a man’s memory will play him.”

“Frightfully funny, Bill.”

“Well, it is. I wouldn’t take me oath even now it was you or Ede Potts or maybe Annie Tricket spoke to me about it. Shows a man can’t trust his own memory.”

“By jings that’s true,” affirmed Ed. “Here’s me put two bottles beer away Saturday night and blow me if I could remember where till I found ’em this mornin’ in the end chaff bin.”

Dan exploded a feat of unconscious memory there by shouting, “Them was my two bottles. Been wonderin’ all day what cow took them bottles. You flamin’ well pay me them two bottles. . . .”

That was a matter of course uproar and Dan cut it

short by saying, "Oh well, time I was gettin'" and turned to go. But Herb was waiting for him there. He stopped Dan to say austerely, as bidding him mark that this was no matter for fraternal bellowing, "From this on, cut it out."

"Cut out what?"

"Take the case and no names mentioned. A girl is travellin' with a bloke. Whether that girl is a twicer or not, that girl is on view for that bloke's opinion. Therefor a bloke that puts a finger on that girl gets his face pushed in."

"What you gettin' at, Ede Potts——"

"No names mentioned," said Herb sternly. "A case is stated. Take it or leave it."

Dan left it. "You gimme the willies," he said, and made for the gate. At that Herb abandoned the maundering forensic for action and dashed inside for his hat and out in pursuit of Dan. Bellowing broke out on the road that led to Potts's dairy farm.

Jerry heard all that while keeping a petrified attention on Pa Puncheon and trying to watch Angel too. She sat with her arms folded on her knees and her eyelids drooped in a gentle reverie that had forgotten Bill Purfroy, who was now talking fruit pests with Ed. She had forgotten her own fingers, too. Only Jerry saw the idle hand next to Bill gently span his forearm and trail a caress over its massive strength.

And Bill only made an unconscious gesture of brushing something off his arm while saying to Ed, "Well, we did have trouble with coddlin's but this new emulsion. . . ."

Hatred and contempt for him seethed through Jerry; loathing for Angel. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY

EVERYONE knows that honeymoons die of a black taste in the mouth and images of murder. All put on, too; that is the damnable thing. A passion for self dramatization; of such is the kingdom of hell.

"Angel, do you really love me?"

"Of course I do, Jerry."

"Are you always going to love me?"

"Always."

"You don't mean it."

"Why don't I, Jerry?"

"How could you. Me? But nobody else could love you like I do. You know that, don't you? I'm mad over you. And suppose I made money——"

With the inflection of tone that changes to a topic of interest Angel said, "That Ede Potts! You'd think the boys would drop to her, wouldn't you. She got five of them to take a chance for her on that wristlet watch raffle and because Dan won it for her he thinks she's sweet on him. . . ."

Jerry stifled groans. He could not command attention by embraces because it was afternoon in the orchard and Herb was mulching young trees half a field away. Angel sat in the crook of a cherry tree and the late sunlight brought her cool flesh to life, and sifted its delicate aroma through her thin frock. Jerry gazed down at her, confounded to discover that beauty and a blank emotion made nothing of the torments they inspired. A desire devastated him to fix this moment

for ever; to finalise life by arrangement; to snatch Angel from all impure contacts and grovel in submission to her while subjecting her to the whims of an oriental despot.

"Tell me straight, Angel; do you like Bill Purfroy?"

"Yes, I like Bill, Jerry."

"Oh hell, Angel!——"

She made nothing of that ghastly confession. Jerry scowled, gritted his teeth, and hissed breath through them. Dignity has its forlorn resources too.

"That mutt! That mudhead! He's all beef and no brains. You couldn't like a mutton headed fool like that. What the hell, Angel!——"

He had to sneak her hand to impress on its slack tissues that of all men, he alone was worthy by a knowledge of her perfection hidden from other eyes.

"That fool couldn't love you like I do. By God, Angel, if you turn me down for that fool!——"

Angel turned her ankle to study the curve of her instep in a new pair of shoes. What she might have said was, "I paid two ten for those shoes and they aren't worth it." What she did say, in the terms of another trade convention, was, "A boy like you isn't much use to me, Jerry."

Jerry should have fizzled out on the spot by an estimation of his ego that impaled it on a pin, like a periwinkle, and pronounced it not worth eating. As it was he only went on complaining and grovelling and demanding perfect love.

And he watched every appearance of Bill Purfroy with jealousy fermenting within him its infernal axiom that treachery must be confirmed in order to confirm its torments. It was not confirmed. Bill drifted into Puncheon's at intervals because he happened to be pass-

ing. He made a point of saying so, and he only talked to Angel if she insisted on it, and Angel never insisted on anything. Why, then, Jerry's instantaneous conviction that a licentious bargain was ratified the moment Angel came near Bill. Bill ratified nothing. It was Jerry who got the assurance that Bill was a magnificent coloured lump of masculinity, even if he did have the expressionless eye of a cow. Bulls have expression. . . .

So have stallions. Bill astride of his stallion divided a transmission of potentialities, at least to the eye. Jerry met the pair of them a Sunday later on the road to Puncheon's, though Bill was not going there. He said so.

Jerry walked beside the stallion, admiring him. He admired Bill too. No harm in Bill, even if lewd lax fingers had caressed his arm. Bill did not know they had done it; perhaps the fingers did not know, either.

They came to Puncheon's and Jerry said, "Oh, well, so long, Bill." Bill said, "Oh, well, being here—" and got off the stallion. A treacherous fellow, after all.

Ed was in the fowl run behind the stable intently looking at fowls, having come there for that very purpose. He now came as far as the stable to greet Bill and Jerry, not too loudly. Jerry glanced at the house, glimpsing girls' frocks on the side verandah, where Dan Puncheon sat in his shirt sleeves. By the gullible little computations of jealousy, Jerry decided to stay in the yard in order to keep Bill there too. But Bill preferred the yard. He slipped the stallion's reins under a stirrup leather and lounged on the stable door with Ed, who said, as making a concession to disputed opinion, "Well, I got to own that horse carries his own weight. . . ."

Jerry fidgeted on the outskirts of their droning,

wanting to see Angel and hoping she would not come out. He could hear her flat even tones from the verandah at intervals, but Edie Potts's brisk conscientious voice did most of the talking. It was Edie, the wretch who stepped down to the garden path and said brightly, "Why, there's Bill." Angel came to look at Bill too. Edie linked an arm with Angel's and they dawdled to the yard, followed by Dan.

Their voices sent Ed slinking for cover into the stable and brought Herb to the door of his bedroom, red faced and yawning. He had been asleep, but scowled himself awake at the sight of Edie.

"Never seen *you* come," he said resentfully.

"Well, Herb, I didn't expect you to be on the look out for me."

"Catch me. I got other things to look out for."

Edie endorsed that, with a kind but cold nod. Angel went to the stallion and smoothed its neck, charmed by the thrill of vitality from its powerful muscles. The animal arched its crest, nosing her neck with a long quivering inhalation. Jerry drew a vicious breath too. Against the black velvet of the stallion her face had a porcelain finish.

"Think you could trust me out with him, Bill?" she asked.

"Well, Angel, I dunno about trustin' *you*——"

Angel released the reins and touched a stirrup to her armpit. "You ride my length, Bill," she said, and tipped her toe into the stirrup and went up with an easy pull on the off saddle flap. The pommel hitched up her frock and the stallion's broad barrel plumped a span of bare leg above her silk stockings. Almost any leg looks lovely in that setting, and in any setting Angel's legs were lovely. Ed suddenly thrust a boiled

beef face from the stable to shout, "Get off that horse makin' a bloody exhibition of yourself." The core of a brother hidden within him had displaced the terror of death for a moment, but Edie looked at him and he shot out of sight again. Dan said with indignation, "Don't be a mutt, Angel, you can't hold that horse."

Angel only turned the stallion towards the gate. A little bothered on her account, or else on the stallion's, Bill walked beside her, saying, "Give him a loose rein, Angel, but don't let him out. He pulls a bit, and with only a snaffle——"

"All right, Bill, I won't let him out."

She touched the stallion with her heel and cantered off, letting him reef at the bit, testing a bizarre hand on his temper. They turned a bend of the road. . . .

"Angel's a fool, taking a risk like that," said Jerry complainingly to Herb.

"Do her good to come a crack," said Herb morosely. "Do any blanky woman good——"

They heard Angel return before she appeared at a gallop. Style had something to do with it but not all. Her elbows were clamped in and she lifted in the saddle trying to pull the stallion up, but he carried her well down the road till a wide swerve at a passing car allowed her to haul him in on the curve and bring him round, reefing and high stepping and tossing foam from a champed bit. Bill walked down the road to meet her and take the stallion's rein. But Angel did not get off. She sat there talking down at Bill, who stood there talking up at her, his face at an elevation of bare leg above a silk stocking.

Nice for Jerry. Herb had got Edie across to the orchard fence and was muttering a maundering at her. Jerry heard Edie say precisely, "No, Herb, a boy may

be regarded as a friend or a dancing partner, but that does not give him the right to regard himself as dictating to a girl's friends or dancing partners, and though I tell you to your face that as a *friend*, Herb, I *like* you——”

“Well, we gotter get this right. Come outer this.”

He pushed Edie at the fence and Edie cocked a precise but nice leg through it. They went in among the trees, Herb seeming to bump Edie along with his shoulder, and Edie leaning at Herb to let him bump her.

Dan watched them out of sight, scratching his chin. Then he laughed, as men laugh who have recaptured a temporarily mislaid scepticism on the purity of human motives.

“Look at the mug,” he said to Jerry. “Can’t see that he’s having his leg pulled. That Ede Potts is a twicer.”

Jerry did not care what Ede Potts was; he knew. All women were twicers. He leaned on the gate, pretending not to look at that treacherous pair down the road, chaperoned by a stallion. . . .

Dan came to the gate and took a long look at them too. Not as a brother, either; that was the damnable thing. It was in that character that he turned suddenly on Jerry to demand, “You dossin’ here tonight?”

What a question to ask a guest. It confused Jerry so much he found himself saying, “No, Dan, I only dropped in. I think I’ll be getting along now.”

Dan nodded, endorsing that. Jerry nodded and went, going up the road, to avoid the disgrace of going down it. But the disgrace that really disturbed him was that question of Dan’s, because Dan’s eye had gone quite opaque while asking it. . . .

In an evil earth of women and brothers, Jerry sought its one bolt hole of safety. But women had invaded that, too. When he came up the Tregear back yard that night he saw Peter in the kitchen with Florry Candler and Aggie Menders, the cook. That meant the rest of the family were not at home, and Jerry sampled for the moment a scene idyllic and rational. Aggie pushed an iron rapidly to the disarticulated gabble of her own voice, while Florry sat on the table swinging her legs, and Peter lolled on Florry, magnificently at home in a harem.

At the sight of Jerry he let out a howl of welcome and rushed to embrace him. "It's old Jerry; it's the old bloke come back again. Give him a kiss, Florry; bite the old bloke just to show he likes you. . . ."

He bundled them together with the inconsequential gambols of a Newfoundland pup and brought all three floundering to the floor. Jerry scrambled out of it but Peter found the play excellent and wrestled all over the floor with Florry, who giggled with pleasure and fought like a panther. They knocked over a basket of freshly ironed clothes and set Aggie distractedly squawking, "Will you look at them and believe there was a stroke of work done in this house with a rumpus like that going on the minute the missus is out of it, and if your games get you the sack, Florry Candler, don't say you didn't ask for it, and God love me will you get off my week's washing. . . ."

She slapped at the combat and was pulled over on top of it and disgraces were done to her. "This is where the ravishing begins," said Peter, helping to pull the frantic Aggie up by the feet. Released from that she staggered round the kitchen like a stunned fowl,

and fell into a chair wailing, "Another week of this and I go clean off my crumpet and God knows I've got enough to send me dilly without putting up with the pranks of a pair of brats hot enough to singe the whiskers off a brass monkey, and that's your state of mind to your face, Florry Candler——"

"Poor old Aggie's got her middle age nut house," said Florry.

"May you get it too, you irreverent slut, and I only hope it lifts the lid off your skull and makes you want to bump peace out of it on a brick wall," exclaimed the indignant Aggie. But she left that to say "My God my ironing!" and dashed to work again, speeding the iron at a pace set by her gabble.

". . . A nut house it is and that's God's reward for a pure girl that's kept the memory green of my poor boy Artie that passed out fifteen year ago and left me with a vow to keep unspotted from the world, and that's a state you've lost the memory of if ever you had it to begin with, Florry Candler. . . ."

Florry searched Peter's pockets for a packet of cigarettes and lit one, blowing smoke into Peter's ear, which nearly started another wrestling match. Voltages of lyricism were in the ascendent here, it seemed. Jerry nodded resignedly at Peter, as one yet to go through the limbo of a woman's perfidy.

"Get what you can out of it, Pete; Florry will turn you down too," he said lugubriously.

"Will she?" said Peter, astonished at this dark prediction. "I'll crack her neck if she does. What's bitten you, Jerry?"

"I'm sick of everything. I'm sick of Angel. She's——"

"You don't mean to say she's turned you down."

"No, but—Bill Purfroy's always round there and I'll swear she's trying to get him going."

Florry laughed. "If a girl can get Bill Purfroy going she deserves him. He's too slow to catch a turnip."

"You really think so, Florry?"

"Lord, Jerry, you don't want to bother your nut about Bill; he doesn't know what girls are for."

This was consolation from an expert and cheered Jerry a little. In Florry's world there were no infidelities; even from men. She reached over to release Jerry of a fatuous male aspiration by patting his head. "Get him a pencil and paper, Pete, and we'll make him draw Aggie going gay."

A Venetian lady of Titian's era, she put her chin over Jerry's shoulder to direct an Aretino fantasy, grabbing each exhibit with chuckles of delight. Aggie refused to look at them while looking at them with outcries of horror.

". . . God love me if ever I seen meself—If you ain't an abandoned young hound, Jerry Gresham, letting that slut egg you on to put a scandal on a pure woman. . . ."

They had to shuffle the papers suddenly out of sight because a measured step came down the kitchen passage and a deal board face came round the kitchen door. As one used to marshalling evidence without committing the case to opinion on it, Mr. Tregear merely observed that Aggie was ironing, Florry folding, Jerry shuffling and Peter indignantly wanting to know what this unwarranted looking into kitchens meant.

"Come out of that kitchen," said his father.

Peter came out of it, muttering, and was led down

the passage, where, as a client, he was given six and eight pence worth of legal opinion.

“You’ve heard of maintenance orders, I suppose. Very well, then, *keep* out of that kitchen.”

He stalked off and Peter, bedamned to maintenance or any other orders, went back to that kitchen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

JERRY and Peter took a day off from life; they needed it. The anomaly of art was theirs; that life is more fascinating to talk about than to live. By their talk it was a ghastly muddle of frustration but by the illusion of talk it was clarified of muddle.

They walked from Key Heights over the sand dunes to the ocean beach and loitered on down the coast, walking on the packed wet sand left by the ebbing tide. Twenty feet inland it was hot summer but the spray-cooled air at the water's edge sweetened their bodies and the sand was cold underfoot.

On this weekday morning the beaches were not crowded, but there were always surfers between the flags that marked bathing places safe from the undertow; always groups lying about on the sand browning their pelts, always children in the vague charge of nurse girls dazed by sunlight and ninepenny novelettes; always girls,—bright things scampering between sun and surf. Betimes Peter and Jerry said to one another, "That's a bonzer little girl," or, "Those two are looking our way; what about it?"

But they always let that go. Engrossed in each other and life and muddle, they preferred to remain safe.

". . . Hanged if I know how it is, Pete, but I used to think that to have a girl like Angel would make everything perfect, but by ginger, does it? Mind you, she's marvellous; absolutely, but same time:—Now take this Bill Purfroy business . . ."

“Take me and Florrie. Slashing tart, Florrie, but—Mind you, I don’t think she’d take on Ronny but you know what *he* is. And Florrie’s the sort always on for a lark. . . .”

“The trouble with women, Pete, is you can’t be certain of them. If I was only certain of Angel, I feel I’d be absolutely certain about everything else.”

“You’ve hit it, Jerry. Take me and the old man. He knows dam’ well I can’t sight the idea of going to the University. I’ve told him. All he said was, ‘Yes, you want to make a living without the trouble of making it.’ Now that’s damned unjust. If it’s a matter of that, why doesn’t he make Ronny work?”

“Well, my old man’s always giving Wally an allowance. Not that I want it, but—By ginger, I wonder what he’ll say when he finds out about my chucking school. Oh well, I don’t care. If I could only settle things about getting away to work. . . .”

“If I could only settle that rot about going in for law. . . .”

So simple, all this, to be settled by a little arrangement. A divine enlightenment assured them that aspiration and its attainment in themselves was wilfully obstructed by the malice of other people. A satisfactory conviction, on the whole, with its subtle ingredient of martyrdom.

They lunched at a beach kiosk, dividing the cost between them, though Jerry had a pound note, and showed it to Peter, who admitted that it was a useful thing to have. Money was still to them an exotic token doled out by parents in small sums for small expenses or diversions. A protective funk blanked out inquiry into the system by which parents acquired these small discs and peculiar slips of paper, which they assumed

to disparage by a vague resentment that parents did not give more of them away to sons.

Through the afternoon shadows they dawdled home, and arrived there at evening, aware of peace, and the solace of communion which disposed of a restless conviction that something had to be done about life in a hurry. As Peter said, "Boiled down, Jerry, what does it amount to. Practically everything a man wants to do, and which he knows he ought to do, is something he's not allowed to do. Well, what's the blanky solution? Do the thing he wants to do and to hell with everybody."

"My idea exactly, Pete."

With responsibility for the future nicely shelved from responsibility, they arrived at the Tregear back gate and crossed its stone paved court to their printer's privacy.

Its privacy was being violated. Peter paused, exchanging an indignant glance with Jerry at the sound of Florrie's giggle. A malicious giggle, which retorted on the spiteful tone of Ronny's voice. "All right, you cocky little slut; wait till I catch that young lout Peter with you again. . . ."

Peter arrived at the door, austere glaring. Florrie and Ronny faced each other like wrestlers who watch an opening to grapple at. They were both ruffled and Ronny's black eyes were alight with temper.

"What's this cow doing here?" demanded Peter.

"He's not doing anything, Pete, he's only trying to," said Florrie.

"You get to hell," said Ronny, and gave Peter a heave that sent him off his feet against the type stand, which turned over its upper case and dished type all over him.

Never would that type be set again. Peter came off the floor bereft of discretion and pelted himself at Ronny, who was driven through the doorway, swiping punches. But rage immortalised Peter. He battled in head down, intent on murder. They fought over everything; a bucket got inanely tangled with combat and was sent clattering; collision with a pot stand toppled a pot through the scullery window; Aggie Menders screeched within and ran out clutching her head to run straight inside again. . . .

Jerry skipped, thrilled and horrified. Florrie clapped madly, shrilling, "Into him, Pete; good little boy; punch him in the wind. . . ."

Fanny Tregear brought a startled face to an upper window and gave one look to dart for the stairs. She sailed into the yard crying imperiously "Stop! How dare you:—stop, I say——"

Nothing could stop them. The blind angers of the North had gone to Peter's head and obtused all objectives but the need to get Ronny down and do for him. Ronny was white and vicious, but he was trying to stop the young fool; his own nose was bleeding and a little of that goes a long way. Fanny Tregear abandoned imperiousness and tried to grapple with them, but missed and was bumped aside and gave a cry of despair. Beside her, Florrie was squealing, "Paste him, Pete; give him another."

"Oh you vile creature," gasped Fanny, and smacked Florrie's face. On the recoil Florrie returned the slap; a hard precise slap, that sounded hollow. The scream of a violated perfect lady instantly stopped the fight. Peter and Ronny staggered apart, bewildered by a cry of genuine drama. Tableau presented them with

Florrie swelling her breasts at Mama, who tottered, breathless, aghast at an unmentionable act.

From that she swerved to the imperious upright, pointing Florrie off the earth.

"You leave this house. Instantly!"

"Eh! What?" exclaimed Peter.

"Silence!" hissed his mother. She turned a frozen fury on Florrie again. "If you are not out of this house in ten minutes I shall send for a policeman."

Peter's faculties were still befogged by northern rages, which now rushed to discover a monstrous injustice.

"Policeman!" he shouted, "By ginger, will you send for a policeman. This cow Ronny chases Florrie and you send for a——"

"How dare you speak to your mother in that——" Another swerve at Florrie. "You hear. Leave this house instantly."

Peter now achieved a posture of heroism on some recent heroics. With a bunged and rapidly blackening eye, he stood forth before Florrie.

"Florrie goes, I go," he told his mother.

Florrie giggled. Fanny Tregear place a palm across her eyes and said exhaustedly, "Oh my God!" letting it be understood that there are some indecencies quite beyond a mother's dramatic resources. Ronny had been dabbing a handkerchief at his nose and carefully feeling its contours, but now he came forward impatiently.

"Drop that rot, you young ass," he said to Peter, "And you scoot, Florrie; you're about as ratty as he is."

"Will she scoot!" shouted Peter. "You put all this on Florrie. If Florrie goes——"

Fanny Tregear stamped. But again the rôle of an

outraged mother asphyxiated the utterance of its part. She threw it up and fled to the house, exclaiming, "Where *is* your father? To leave a disgusting scene like this to me——"

A square impassive face vanished suddenly from the breakfast room window. Jerry saw it, but no one else did. It had been there all the while.

In the yard, Peter's heroics were having it out in the key of a fraternal squabble. "I don't care; I won't have this shoved onto Florrie. You try to put it over her and the old woman turns on her——"

"Talk sense. D'you think she doesn't know why you're always hanging round the kitchen."

"Not the point. You come sticking your nose into it and she outs Florrie."

Florrie patted a sleeve of both. "You've got it wrong, Pete. Your Ma sacked me because I slapped her face."

"No?" said Peter, blinking.

"Yes. And I've always wanted to slap it, too." She beamed on both, as partisans in the achievement of a cherished aspiration.

"Well, don't say you didn't ask for the sack," said Ronny.

But Peter refused to concede a heroic ultimatum; a fixation like his black eye. "Well, all I've got to say is that if Florrie goes——"

Mr. Tregear came to the back door and crooked a finger at Peter, who shuffled, scowled, rejected an unwarranted intrusion, and followed it into the house.

"Well, here's to fun," said Florrie, in salute to an episode happily ended. She stretched her arms, preened her fine breasts, nodded a smile at Jerry and went, relaxing into the lazy contours of a woman who

lets life run after her by strolling a little ahead of it. Ronny frowned at her, but even a preoccupation over the shape of his nose could not let a figure like Florrie's go out of its life without a slight protest. "Here, wait a minute," he said and caught it up at the kitchen door.

Jerry hovered, trying to overhear treachery to Peter. "All right, Thursday night," he heard Ronny say. Florrie laughed, a laugh that dismissed a fool while also inviting a lover.

Jerry sneered; these women! He moved across to the printing room, waiting for Peter's return, which remained suspended on the mutable caprice of a parent. The scattered type on the floor presented a forlorn symbol of life forever suspended on a threat of disruption. He was aware of the fatuity of all aspiration, since expectation of happiness achieves a reality greater than its event.

But Peter burst out of the house at last to dispel casuistry over a theory of frustration. A look of astonishment competed with his bunged eye and he grabbed Jerry to offer him a share of good news.

"What d'you think! the old man's going to let me go in for journalism."

"No!"

"Yes. He never said a word about me plugging Ronny. Or about Florrie. He said 'Look here, I've offered to start you in life and you don't want me to. Of course you know all about starting yourself.' Well, I told him; you're a shareholder in the *Era*, get me a job reporting. My idea, see things and write about them. Action. I owned up: no use trying for a living in music; the main thing, see life and find out the job you can do best. He said, 'You're a fool, but you'd better be your own fool than somebody else's.' So

that's fixed. He's going to give me twenty quid and a letter to the *Era* and let me fish for myself."

"You're in luck, Pete."

"Luck! The old man's a good sort. First time I ever spotted it in him really. It suddenly struck me; what a messed up life. Solid respectable man sitting all day in an office and married to the old woman when he comes home. Never had a life. Funny thing, we shook hands; thing I never did in my life with him."

But Jerry was agitated over a more serious matter than a vague signal of emotion from the unreal life of a parent.

"I'll never stick it out here without you, Pete."

"Jerry, you'll have to get away too. We'll take a room together. Go to your old man and tell him straight."

Jerry squirmed. "It's not so easy, Pete. Hanged if I can ever think of anything to say to the old man."

"Why, all you've got to say is——"

But there Peter forgot stage directions for Jerry's destiny by recalling one on his own. "Florrie!" he said, and ran into the house. When he returned three minutes later annoyance contended a little with the optimism of his black eye.

"She's gone. Stinking luck! Oh well, I suppose I'll run against her sometime. But about your old man Jerry. . . ."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NOT so easy!
Jerry fidgeted into the courtyard after breakfast, misplacing phrases to open a difficult subject of discussion with his father, who was fussing about between his bedroom and studio.

Nina had come into the courtyard too, and sat in the swing lounge intently tracing items in the shipping column, and pausing to ruminate over dates. This preoccupation with a future time factor seemed to dispense with its other factor of uncertainty. There was about her that complacency which people use who have rearranged destiny's affairs for it and put the poor thing right.

From her bedroom Baby Gresham noted an item of behaviour in Nina which confirmed observation of a state of mind, but her attention was on Gresham's performance with a suit case, which he had carried to the studio, and was now packing with a number of drawings. Drawings are carried in a portfolio. Moreover, he could be seen putting them in a suit case from her own bedroom.

Jerry reached the studio and sidled in, giving a stilted air of accident to an obvious intrusion. Gresham glanced up abruptly with a frown, which was really not intended for Jerry.

"Well?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Jerry.

He idled out again, improvising resentment at that

frown. But he was glad of its excuse to escape an appeal to his father which he knew very well he had neither the voice nor the vocabulary to make. Free of the courtyard his face settled into a glum mask, presented with another long idle day to fill in. A self imposed penance, which imprisoned him in freedom. Its only road led to Puncheon's and he gritted his teeth suddenly and hissed breath through them. These are lovers' self communings. . . .

Gresham snapped the suit case shut and clapped on his hat and walked across the courtyard, refusing to be detected openly carrying a suit case. Baby obliged him there by coming to her bedroom door and watching his departure. Her look of congealed calm said to him, "I beg you to note that I express no opinion on the obvious fact that you are carrying on a clandestine affair with some wench or other. Amuse yourself by all means, but please understand that I refuse to contaminate my dignity by any sort of protest at the sordid business."

Gresham pitched the suit case into the car and drove off viciously. It held his dress clothes, but damn it, what of that? The Pyle Syndicate was giving a dinner that night and he had left its invitation card on his dressing table to prove it. At the same time he was nagged at by a conviction that he had overdone innocence by making a show of packing papers in the suit case. The futility of male logic is to insist on demonstrating its infallibility. . . .

He drove past the Key Heights garage without looking at it; a practise which so galled a conviction of being under inspection by Key Heights that as a rule he took the road through Manly, though it was longer. Impossible to meet Jim, when a choice of indignities

must force Gresham to be especially nice to him. But Jim had not been near the house since the night that Baby had refused to see him; a piece of duplicity that angered Gresham every time he thought of it. He saw through her present pose of an immaculate withdrawing from vulgar mundanities, which thrust the action of treachery on him.

At the office he put away the suit case and went to the phone, speaking softly into it to keep his voice from reaching Floyd's room. There was an interval before he got his number and a faintly blurred voice asked, "Who's speaking?"

"Walter Gresham. Is that you, Ida?"

"Oh, it's you. Yes, it's me." Her voice went up, with a slight effect of flurry, which she excused by saying, "Did I keep you waiting; the phone just woke me."

"I'm sorry——"

"It's all right:—but we had a late party last night and——"

"Oh, then perhaps—About tonight. I mean,—would you rather put it off?"

"Oh no, I mean, unless you would."

"No, of course not."

"You're quite sure?"

"Of course."

"Very well, then, I'll be——"

The phone slurred there and Gresham thought he heard Ida's voice interject a note of offstage protest. It resumed hurriedly "I'm sorry. Yes, I'll be there. And I've nearly finished one panel. Perhaps you'd like to—But I'll tell you about it. Yes, did you speak?"

"No. But don't hurry the work; there's plenty of

time—But we'll talk about that. Tonight at seven, then, in the lounge."

"Yes, tonight. Yes, very well. Yes, goodbye——"

Gresham hung up on a repetition of assurances, which left him very much aware of a need for them. Now he was in doubt as to whether he had pressed an unwelcome appointment for tonight on Ida or on himself. But he had sent her those panel designs and talked about them over the phone and something had to be done about their palpable pretenses.

He strolled to Floyd's room, humming off inferences about a furtive phone conversation. But Floyd had no attention to waste on inferences these days. He had mislaid his grin and practised reticence with some ostentation. His air to Gresham said, "Please observe that I make a point of not inquiring into your affairs."

"Seen Wally lately?" asked Gresham.

"No."

"Queer; he's certainly sticking to whatever pretext he has decided on for casting me off. First time I've known him to live up to a pose of seriousness. . . ."

But Floyd refused to intellectualise a plaster of good conscience on Gresham's behalf. Like Wally, he maintained a pose of seriousness over a matter not worth being serious about.

Gresham dressed at the office, consoling malice to observe from the window that Floyd took the way to Circular Quay, carrying a loaded bag. He was now living at his Colleroy camp. Serve him right, thought Gresham, grimacing over the discomfort of a dress shirt and stiff collar.

In the Australia Lounge it occurred to him as another affliction that he knew everybody in Sydney. At least, he knew thirty per cent of everybody in the lounge and

fifty per cent of everybody knew him, which is the average ratio of detection by scandal. Guests of the Pyle Syndicate dinner were there too, and he had to explain that the nuisance of a prior dinner appointment prevented him from joining them. Ida came out of the lift to endorse this explanation while he was making it for the third time.

For a moment Gresham saw her smooth white shoulders with the clarity that made a joke of his pretensions to possess the young body that undressed her slim black dance frock. But her lowered eyelids and her quiet air of deference to him confused him into an immediate need to disclaim the indignity of being a middle aged parasite on her immortal kindness.

"You look lovelier than ever, Ida. And how delightful to look at you without the affliction of a family gathering. . . ."

He set that pace for himself too early and put a strain on the necessary return to banalities, which forced him to maintain a key of superlatives by ordering the most expensive dinner to be had, which was not expensive enough to satisfy his craving to exhibit worth by spending money. The dictionary was also busy with definitions of Ida, putting queries of coldness to quietness and reserve to restraint, and posing those theatre panels as an invidious confusion between patron and lover.

". . . I wish they weren't for you. I mean, I know the one I've done isn't good and you won't like to say so."

"I won't need to; I'm quite sure you can do them."

"I'm not; they make me nervous."

"Everybody feels like that about first jobs."

"But I'm finding it so hard to work. I was always

working at home, and now that I've got my own flat and all my time to work I never seem to have time to do any."

"Then you must be having a good time."

"I suppose so. . . ."

Gresham detected a thrill of jealousy because she was having a good time with some youth or other. It surprised him to discover this as an unforeseen threat to his pretensions, and forced him to agitate the claim to a little martyrdom in her service.

"Arrangements for life don't work out, Ida; you've got to let them happen. Easy enough for you, of course, but at my age, the curse is that one has to try and stage manage the damned business and probably make a worse mess of it, and I don't even know whether I'm capable of doing that. You are the main cause of my dilemma."

"I am?"

"Yes; I wish you weren't so desirable. I'm not presuming on a claim to desire you, but I'm hanged if I can help doing so. No, don't mistake me, Ida, I'm not trying to put onto you the responsibility of endorsing action for me over my own mental muddle. . . ."

Which was just what he wanted her to do:—sign his letters patent as lover before he had earned the right to them. Abruptly, he switched from that to a cruder justification of service to her.

"Do you know:—I've been more or less ostracised at home since that dance at the Pacific?"

Ida's eyes opened a moment, frankly innocent.

"By Nina, do you mean?"

"No, by my wife."

He was annoyed at having made that admission, which he had to justify on the usual terms of male

integrity. "Hang it, I'm not objecting to her having a lover. I don't know whether she has, but I suppose so. You saw her with young Jim Guthrie. She'd be a fool to go that far with an attractive youth and not go further. I don't blame her; I suppose she's as bored with life as I am, but hang it, there ought to be a rational basis of give and take about the business. . . ."

Ida listened politely to a revelation of undoubted interest but refused to help it out with indiscreet comment. With her brilliant shoulders and beautifully modelled arms before him, Gresham felt his claims to emotion fizzle out in a stale old used up earth. He was acutely unhappy. The orchestra had started in the dance room and he heard Ida's shoe tapping to its rhythm. That settled the presumptions of a fatuous idealist.

"Come along, Ida, I'm forgetting that there are serious things in life after all. . . ."

He had ordered his table in the dance room to be set with a large bowl of white roses, and the waiter made an act of devotion out of serving coffee and liqueurs. Ida's soft glance appraised a room full of pretty frocks keyed to a tone of jazz, and she pinned a rose in her dress. Her shoulder inclined to Gresham's, conceding worth to him by the grace of woman's right to happiness.

At once Gresham's spirits lightened; he saw his rôle suddenly relieved of the tension of playing the lover to Ida's need for entertainment. Silly devil, worrying over an emotional crescendo that he had no power to inspire. . . .

They rose to dance, and the intimacy of her body disposed of all those complex arrangements to possess it. He understood her hedonism, which refused to

make acidulated protests at being kissed a value for kisses. If her soft body was a plastic confession of emotion her soft voice disposed of italics over it. She merely loved dancing and let her legs say so, that was all.

In fact, he suddenly felt quite safe with her, and managed to convey his relief from alarm to Ida, too. Her reserve lifted, she developed a little laugh; between dances she began to tell him about the minor episodes of life that make up its fullest content; the squabbles of personality at war with a studio theory of art.

“ . . . Oh, yes, and I must tell you about the row I had with Sarah Pottle. You know Sarah’s type; two bananas and a blue plate on a vertical table, and, oh yes, I must tell you first about her affair with Julian Tonks, an awful ass; you know, the zig zag school; paints ‘The sensation of riding in a tram’. . . .”

Charming, these confidences which placed Gresham on the safe and dignified elevation of a mature analyst of life and art. He was astonished at his own presumption in confusing Ida with an emotion over her which had nothing to do with her. Why, she obviously liked him. All he had to do was to give her a good evening and send her home in a taxi.

It was the hall porter who upset the logic of funk which brought the evening to just the right finality. They had danced it out and Gresham’s legs were glad to go off duty. He had drunk his quantum, which blurred the need for a nice adjustment of motives. The assurance of adventure lived and he wanted to get safely home with it. With a little farewell squeeze of the arm he put Ida in the taxi.

But the porter held the door relentlessly open for

him to enter too. Ida took the corner of the seat, which may have left space for him. Obeying the compulsion of these gestures he got in beside her.

But drink and a smooth running car readjusted a slight displacement of assurance. He patted Ida's hand to reassure her of that and she squeezed his in return. They kissed; a brief kiss of understanding, and Ida relaxed contentedly. He put an arm round her and looked down at her face, which looked up to be looked at. In the shadowed cab its calm beauty dispensed with predatory lies, and charmed Gresham with a sincere emotion. He said earnestly, "Thank heaven, Ida, your good taste would never let me make a fool of myself over you."

Their lips met with the quiet precision of a religious rite. Ida drew a long breath which drew his mouth to hers and held it there; her body lifted in a tender arch and was pressed to his; she gave up her youth to him without a reservation. . . .

The logic of funk stranded Gresham in an ecstasy of panic. To stop thinking he went on kissing her, aping the fervour of a neophyte and feeling like one. The abnormal clarity of an emotional climax suspended the triumph and frustration of life on a pin point and confounded him to decide which was his portion. The taxi sped on relentlessly, nearer by every block to a drastic finality.

It pulled up at Ida's flat and a conviction of cessation settled on Gresham's spirit, as if he had reached the end of life. Ida got out and stood by while he paid off the taxi. In silence they moved across to the automatic lift, and Ida pressed the button. The lift closed on them like a trap and they ascended side by side. Perhaps the tension of Gresham's nerves communicated a

bizarre alarm to Ida that something would now have to be done about all this. He glanced at her subdued profile with its downcast eyelids, aghast at the unplumbed mystery of her sex. He was trembling and trying to control it; a prayer pattered through his mind:—"May I carry this thing off well. . . ."

Ida's flat was on the seventh floor, and she fumbled for its key in her hand bag. "Trixy's out,—she—she said she wouldn't be home tonight," she whispered; a warning or a reassurance. Gresham braced himself. . . .

The door opened and a tang of tobacco and voices came out of it. Ida turned a suddenly set face at Gresham; a face which either released anger or dammed up the night's releases. He stared back, uttering a sound of consternation, which was genuine. At that moment, he could not sum up what tension between desire and despair was exploded for him.

Yes, Captain Gruntle was there. And if he had left his arrogance outside that small flat there would have been more room in it. He was quarterdecking a new check suit all over it, and he skipped about and pouted up at Gresham to splutter, "Well well,—Gresham, by gad. Come in, me boy," as a master libertine might say, "Welcome, approved neophyte of our order." Trixy waved a languid hand of greeting from the couch, whereon she reclined in orange and purple silk pyjamas. "Glasses, Harold," she said exhaustedly. Harold was Captain Gruntle, which was another awful revelation.

Captain Gruntle bustled into the kitchenette for glasses and bartended with zeal. There was a small bar of bottles on the table among other matters; things of silk and cambric that creamed out of boxes. By a

special act of inflation, Captain Gruntle had been throwing money about in drapers' shops that day. Trixy's feet were tipped into green and gold slippers designed to walk on the stomachs of amorous homosexualists.

Gresham took a seat, abashed at complicity in these exposures. Ida refused to countenance them; she sat on the arm of the couch, giving Trixy a cold droop of the eyelids for going on in this disgusting way with an ass of a middle-aged married man.

Captain Gruntle beer gassed for all. Ensnconced a million deep in Darlinghurst, he scouted a phantom stalking by twenty years of married martyrdom. Standing before Trixy, he showed her exultantly to Gresham.

"What d'you think of her in that rig out, my boy. Brings out the curves, by Thunder. Stand up, Trixy, and let 'em have a look at the curves. How's that, Gresham, eh! what! No need of a crab winch to take in the slack of her topsail sheets, by gad! . . ."

Trixy stood haughtily to be inspected. She was a short girl with a compensating proportion amidship, and she filled the beach pyjamas with a glove finish on a beam measurement, with a fine sailorly fore and aft slackness below the knee. The arts of sorcery were evinced, and she could afford to rest on a grand achievement. Her manner at Captain Gruntle said, "Oh yes, a masterpiece. There it stands; comment is unnecessary."

Nor was it. Captain Gruntle choked up chuckles and fizzed them out with head waggings and eye popping of assurance that he stood there the signal triumph of woman's art. He pushed Gresham into a corner to sputter, "By Gad, that girl's a wonder, Gresham; a living frozen wonder. She's got the finest

figure on earth and a chilled steel intellect into the bargain, by Gad. Brains, by thunder. They've learned a thing or two since our day, eh! what! No more squeals at being caught out in curlpapers for them, by George; horse sense and hot as mustard!——”

“Yes, yes, Gruntle, you're a very lucky fellow.”

Gresham dodged hurriedly, to escape being fizzed at. He did not know what to do, with Ida seated there immaculate and indrawn. Her smooth modellings told him nothing. . . .

But another visitor came in just then; a youth in shirt sleeves who reached the sitting room door and leaned on it. Gresham diagnosed him as being of the arts by his flop of hair over one eye, by his limp bow tie, his dirty hands, his air that was both precocious and immature. A personable youth, whose large dark eyes sullenly resented Ida.

“The door was open, so I came in,” he said, which seemed a confession of the obvious, but was not. It implied that if the door had been shut he would have scorned to intrude on the treacheries behind it. Ida refused to look at him. She raised her eyes to say “Dan Terry—Mr. Gresham,” and dropped them again, as disdaining to differentiate a war of personalities that included Dan Terry. But Gresham detected the intimacy of disunion between those young people, and nodded brightly at the glum Dan, who frowned because he had to nod back again. Captain Gruntle said regally at him, “Drink,” and jerked a nod at the bottles, scorning to buttle for him. Dan scowled at Captain Gruntle but took his drink. He sidled at Ida and Gresham heard him mutter, “You needn't get marked; I wouldn't have come in if the door hadn't

been open." It seemed an obsession with him, that door.

Gresham rose and Ida looked up swiftly. Her eyes were clouded but Gresham read their message; compunction and relief. He nodded back its admission; love affairs don't get bungled like this. "Can I give you a lift home, Gruntle?" he asked.

Captain Gruntle's arrogance fell into his boots. "Home, by Gad! Well, I suppose there's nothing else for it."

He braced himself for the firing line, but took Trixy into the kitchenette for a dying farewell. Gresham nodded urbanely at Dan Terry and went into the passage, followed by Ida. She said nothing but she put her arms round him and gave him a hard passionate kiss. The epitaph of a triumph; over her shoulder Gresham saw young Dan's scowl at him.

"Thanks, Ida, that's more than I ever had the right to deserve," he whispered. Generous girl; he would never know such another.

Captain Gruntle burst out of the flat, lest the last minute courage of martyrdom fail him. He exploded short groans of anguish all the way down in the lift. Gresham wished to murder him, this saviour.

Too much trouble to go back to his office and change; bedamned to detections where there was now nothing to be detected. They got a taxi to the Quay and caught an after midnight boat for the Shore, and all the way home to Colleroy in Gresham's car Captain Gruntle fizzed and groaned funk and rebellion.

". . . I made one mistake in life, Gresham, one ghastly and fundamental mistake, and by Gad, I've repented it every day of my life for twenty years. Twenty years of nagging ragging bull-baiting bloody

martyrdom. Purity Leagues, by Gad. Prohibition, by Thunder. Vinegar Starch Moth Balls and Bed Bugs!——

“That woman!

“I tell you, Gresham, I’ve even had to keep my whisky in the wood shed. If I want to give a friend a drink I’ve got to crawl out of the house like a bally burglar. By Gad, I daren’t bring a friend into the house. She’s a china maniac! Got a front room chock a block with junk you wouldn’t dump on a rubbish tip. She’s used that dump to scare every friend I ever had off the premises. They won’t face it. Never lets ’em off so much as the price of a bally old cracked teapot!!

“Would you believe it;—I’ve even had to go to
CHURCH!

“But I’ve settled it. I’m fed up to the back teeth. Let her bawl down hell and have the neighbours in and all her damned relations. My back’s to the wall and I’ll fight to the last ditch, or go under, by Thunder! . . .”

Gresham dropped him at a dark and damned suburban street, and he went into its fearsome spaces muttering and sputtering;—a brave man. Ignominiously safe, Gresham drove on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AS GRESHAM turned in at the drive gates he did not see his headlights pick up for a flash a limping figure in shirt and trousers that dodged swiftly into the shadows while the car passed.

It was Jerry. . . .

But that goes back a little. In spite of Dan Puncheon's eye, Jerry had elected to spend that night at Puncheon's. The torments of suspense had to reach finality somehow, with Angel seated next to Bill Purfroy at dinner, and between them the unuttered communion of a secret pact. He was going to have that out with her after dinner, and tried to tell her so by a pressure on her toes under the table that sent a thrill of hate and adoration up his own leg. But Angel's legs had no connection with her calm eyes, which looked through Jerry into a space of divine tolerance that knew nothing about earthborn ecstasies and tortures. Treachery?—she did not know it existed. Under Jerry's stultified glare she came to the verandah after dinner and said, "I'm going across to Key Heights, Bill." . . .

Good safe evenings on the Puncheon homestead. Pa burbling on and on the ana of an unmurdered father fantasy, Herb away, pottering at Potts's dairy farm. A drivelling uproar between Ed and Dan over a shaving stick:—"Never touched your flamin' shaving stick." "Been lathered on, that goddam shaving stick; thing I never done in me life to a shaving stick. Take the

flamin' goddam shaving stick." A polluted shaving stick hurled into the night——

And all the while Angel and the execrable Bill Purfroy dawdled a loathsome parody of perfect love among the orchard lanes. Every moment of that ordeal asphyxiated Jerry and brought him to life by rage; it approved him one worthy of a lyrical concept of happiness.

But Herb came at last to yawn contentedly at the verandah and say, "Bedo for me,—Comin', Jerry?"

Herb's monologue that night had got rid of its major theme. By a slight perversion of motive, it was now seen that the art of feminine piracy might be turned to a protection of male pockets.

". . . This working for a man's family gets a man nowhere. Ten years' time, where are you; paid member of the family. Now there's that ten acre lot of Ede Potts' old uncle Ben; planted three year trees comin' on a treat. Bit of luck the old bloke pegged out last year. Now supposin' a bloke bought that *as* a member of the family——

"I been lookin' into it. No harm lookin' into a business proposition. And taken as granted two can live cheaper than one. Taken a woman does her own housework. Now Ede Potts——"

At last. Voices at the yard gate; Bill's drawl and Angel's half tones in reply. There were intervals of loitering silence, as if each meditated in detachment from the other. A long time before Jerry's afflicted ears heard Angel's steps come up the side path and reach the house. Unable to bear it, he said to Herb, "There's Angel back."

"Yers. I'll say this for Ede, she's a saver. Another

thing; she's got her own kitchen practically furnished already. Aluminum pots——”

“Angel seems to be seeing a lot of Bill Purfroy these days.”

“Yers; Angel's goin' to marry Bill. And there's another thing about Ede; she's straight. Like to see the bloke that could put it over Ede. . . .”

But Jerry was holding his breath at a horrifying revelation. He had to grit his teeth to hold back outcries at its infamy; to hold himself down in bed lest he rush out and force Angel to recant it instantly. She must recant it; no woman could face such an unveiling of her perfidy. . . .

Herb's pipe clicked to the floor at last and Jerry was half out of bed with it, suspended there only till Herb's snore took up the drone of his voice. In the dark Jerry feverishly got into his pants and trod on Herb's dog, who let out a yelp. Rattled but reckless, Jerry sped across the yard and knocked over a broom on the verandah. Bunglings of frenzy. He hated that crawl through the dark house, but he dared not go by the verandah because Dan's bedroom opened onto it too. He pushed into the scent sifted darkness of Angel's room and patted a warning that he was here on her bare arm. She was awake, and did not alter her pose when Jerry took her face in his hands to hiss viciously into it, “Angel, you're *not* going to marry Bill Purfroy.”

“Hush, Jerry!”

“You're not; you can't. Marry a mutton headed chump like that. Own up it's not true. By God, Angel, if you go back on me—Look here, you've simply got to——”

Angel pressed a palm over his mouth to stop these

feverish hissings, which he had to emphasise somehow. He thrust his face free and buried it with a groan in the spun silk softness of her hair, searching for her ear with his lips.

"Angel, promise me. Chuck that stinking fool and wait till I make enough money to get married."

Angel did not know that anything was funny. She only murmured vaguely, "Funny boy, Jerry."

"I'm older than a mutt like Bill Purfroy. You don't think I can make money. You wait. Wait a year. Don't go and madly marry a pumpkin like Bill Purfroy. Say you won't. Say you'll only wait for a year."

"Don't make so much noise."

"But Hell, Angel, I must settle this."

"Go back to bed; you'll wake somebody."

"I don't care——"

"Shush!!"

For once Angel's lax fingers gripped his arm with decision. Jerry sat up, still holding her. He heard silence, which is full of infinitesimal noises. A faint whine of hinges reached him and paralysed him. Before he could sense the knowledge of a presence in the room, the switch clicked and light exploded like a bomb——

Dan Puncheon exploded too. He was revealed there horribly in pink pyjamas and a purple face, and he burst out all the breath he had been holding in to shout "Got yer," as he dived for Jerry.

Paralysis released Jerry with a leap that reached the verandah. He caught a backward flash of Dan in collision with the bed and heard his furious "Leggo; I'll do for the young bastard." The rest was insensate flight. By the improvised cunning of mortal funk Jerry ran straight at the side fence and bolted across

the orchard. The impact of ploughed earth was nothing to his bare feet. He ran till he had doubled down and across three more fields and reached a clump of wattles, into which he crawled and collapsed, hearing pursuit everywhere in the pumping of his own heart.

It slowed to silence at last, but he still lay there, confounded at an event that had crashed his only stable universe. He had done it himself, too, by his blind incredible folly in taking a risk like that with a Dan Puncheon next door to it. His flesh tightened to a chill when he thought of all the risks he had taken; each one a potential death. Now he had ratified every one of them; Dan Puncheon would belt the life out of him at the first encounter. If he was to live at all, it could only be by an ignominious slinking down byways to escape a punch on the nose.

He squirmed into the open again, because he could not bear to sit there thinking about having his nose punched. The chill silence of a starlit night enforced only one solution on such a nemesis. Already its resolution was inevitable.

Quaking at Dan Puncheon lurking everywhere, and treading gingerly on tender feet, he went by back lanes homeward, deploring at every step the conscience free ease of boots. It took him an hour to reach the Key Heights road, slinking for cover at every late walker abroad, lest he be discovered treading the night in bare feet. Cars blazed him into brief illuminations of ignominy. At the drive gates he just managed to dodge his father's headlights. . . .

He lurked in the garden till the car was garaged and his father's steps crossed to the courtyard. Avoiding the gravelled paths because of his poor feet, Jerry

reached his own room and flopped on the bed, exuding relief from exertion.

He lay there for a long time, glad to transfer an exhaustion of the spirit to his feet, which ached abominably. But there was work to be done that night, and he got off the bed with gingerly precautions to switch on the light and find a pair of slippers.

A need for restoratives expressed itself and he thought of food. But this night had already marked a deviation of time factors which tomorrow must confirm. In the pantry there were also bottles; restoratives for men. He reached for a bottle of Sydney Bitter.

Beer is a generous drink, but where resolution has done with misgivings, there are others. Brandy for men. Resolutely, Jerry reached down the brandy and took a swig at it. Not much of a swig, but enough to set him gulping and blinking astonishment at a sensation of being brilliantly alight and alive from the bowels outward. On the spot, he ceased to make resolutions; they were already made.

From the lumber room he selected a suit case and carried it to his bedroom. In one half he packed shirts, collars, socks and a suit of pyjamas, and got rid of them. Then he began to select drawings to be taken. . . .

That involved a confiction of sentiment and aesthetics that no one has yet settled for himself; works worth preserving. By the time Jerry had emptied all his caches there was a muddled heap on the floor that would require a packing case. His best drawings went into the suit case till they filled it. Those school cheques were put aside on the table, to be settled with later. But the heap of manuscript and letters and scrawls and sketches confounded him till the bright inspiration of brandy pooh poohed sentiment over the

damned rubbish. Burn it, of course. He laid out a sheet and began to pile the stuff onto it for carriage. Betimes a hint of voices reached him from the other side of the house, but he paid no attention to it. . . .

When Gresham came to the courtyard door and pushed it open he stood for a moment uneasily staring at the bar of light from his wife's open door. To reach his own room he had to cross it, and Baby was not in bed, but seated at her table in a silk dressing robe.

No matter; he had nothing to hide, and walked across to his room and turned on the light. Surrounded by the courtyard walls, he admitted a queer feeling of relief; prisons also shut out a dangerous world. Relief adduced also a generous warmth for Baby, begotten of protective cunning, a flop in emotion, and the spectacle of her seated there alone, waiting up to protest a gesture of rejection by him. A tribute to him. Standing there on tired legs, he meditated kindness towards her; an impulse to go across and express it.

But Baby forestalled that. He heard her slow step cross the courtyard and looked up expectantly. But the face he met at the door quite rejected a display of generous emotion on *his* account. It was hard and white and sharpened, and her stare utterly repudiated a display of wilful innocence.

"Well, are you satisfied at last?" she asked.

"Satisfied!——"

"Oh, don't protest the usual nonsense. Your affair, now that you've had it."

Gresham was forced to assemble and reconstruct the stigmata of guilt.

"That's a silly accusation. I've had no affair."

Baby's lips twisted a bitter comment at the bloom of rice powder on his right shoulder. "I did not really

need to ring up the Australia to say that if you were dancing they were not to call you to the phone," she said, and put the trivial detection of perfidy aside for its motive.

"You *would* have it, of course; I recognised that from the first. But have you arranged for what is to happen now that you *have* had it?"

"But what rot. I tell you I have *not* had an affair."

"If you've arranged for a rôle of complacence from me you've made a mistake. I am not at all complacent. I determined to let you have your idiotic affair, because you were ready to turn resentment on me if you didn't, but I determined to leave you the moment you had it."

Confounded, Gresham realised that her mask had really failed her. She was outraged. Her face was haggard; her evil other face, that she showed to nobody. No doubt she had arranged to reject him, but she had not arranged to suffer for doing so. Alarmed for both of them, he said earnestly.

"Look here, Baby, you're utterly wrong. I never deceived you about my desire for a little entertainment out of life, but I have not deceived you with another woman."

"Liar!"

She spat the word at him, loathing him for her own humiliation. Gresham stared at her and then glared. This injustice dispelled concern for her.

"My God, you've got a hide. Accuse me of deceiving you on top of your blatant affair with young Guthrie. I don't want to tag up its evidence, damn it. I saw you kiss him in the garden that night you did *not* spend at the dance with him. You spent it somewhere down the beach. I never said anything about it because I accepted it as my dismissal."

"As your excuse, you mean."

"A damned good excuse."

"No excuse. Do you think I could be cheap enough to be one of Jim's affairs?"

"Yes."

"Oh, believe it if you want to. Or if you need to."

She turned, stating finality to that. Its imbecility disposed of, she turned again.

"I've no regret for not having deceived you. Do you think I was going to give you that justification for running round after young girls. I've saved myself that disgusting humility and now I'll save what self respect I've got left by leaving you."

They glared animosity, but Baby's was genuine. Gresham sat down suddenly, giving a histrionic exhibition of the exhaustion he really felt.

"What damned rot all this is. For nothing. I've done nothing. I wish to God I had. What we need is a real bust up. This isn't real; it's pumped up. But keep it up. If you must feel a conviction of outraged integrity, feel it. I don't care. I don't care a tinker's curse for any God-damned foolery this lunatic asylura can put on me."

Baby drew a sharp breath. Her fury against him stultified her; not because he had deceived her, but because he refused to justify deceit by a decent display of emotion. This supine collapse was the last insult. She turned abruptly and went swiftly back to her room, closing her door with vicious finality.

Gresham remained slumped in his chair, too used up to scowl. He accepted finality; the finality of futility.

It was some time before he acquired motivity to climb out of his chair and out of his clothes and into his pyjamas. Even so, he doddered, unable to focus atten-

tion on going to bed. A side window of his bedroom opened on the drying lawn, and beyond that the garage. Behind the garage a flare of fire reddened the air. He stared at this, puzzled, and went out through the courtyard to investigate it.

Household rubbish was burned in a cleared space behind the garage, and in that space stood Jerry, burning rubbish. With a stick he languidly poked a mass of smouldering papers, turning them over to make them flare again.

“What the deuce are you doing there, Jerry?”

Jerry leaped on his tender feet, alarmed at a ghost appearance of his father in pyjamas behind him.

“Only burning rubbish,” he muttered.

“At this insane hour?”

They stared across a dimming radius of fire, each at a loss to divine incentive in the other. Then Gresham said abruptly, “Go to bed. If you must burn rubbish, do it at a rational time.”

He turned, and Jerry followed, damning a most unjustifiable act of espionage on his private affairs. Gresham reached his room and there hesitated, his own disturbance of mind reaching out to account for this conspiratorial rubbish burning. As usual, impulses to investigate equivocations from Jerry arrived to him after their event. He wavered for ten minutes and then went to the kitchen courtyard.

Jerry’s room was alight and his door open and he was doing something to the base of his chest of drawers. At the presence of his father in the room he sat back violently with the “Damn” of a surfeited soul. Maledictions on this night that lived only to expose him.

Gresham’s frown travelled from Jerry to the bag on the bed, open and packed for departure. A valedictory

statement sufficient in itself, and Gresham said peremptorily,

“Now look here, Jerry, what’s the meaning of this?”

Jerry arose from the floor and sullenly confirmed an exposure.

“I’m going to clear out.”

“Are you? And where are you clearing out to?”

“Sydney.”

“Why are you clearing out?”

“Oh, just to start making a living. A man’s got to make a start sometime.”

“Quite so, but . . .”

But just there Gresham’s eye detected the familiar style of his handwriting on the pile of cheques and bent over to examine them. Jerry said, “Oh Hell,” like one who has exhausted his gamut of maledictions.

“School cheques for five quarters,” confirmed Gresham. “Now look here, I’ve had enough of these furtive antics of yours. What’s the meaning of this?”

Desperation sent Jerry’s voice up to a wail. “I tell you I couldn’t stand that rotten school any longer. I stopped going there; that’s all.”

“But I’ve been getting your quarterly reports.”

“I know; I posted them myself.”

“What? You’ve been forging those reports.”

“No, it was the same report. I—I sneaked it back from your table each time and kept it for the next quarter. I knew you’d never notice it. And I never meant to use those cheques; I was just going to burn them.”

Gresham stared at him, digesting these revelations which made a joke of parental dignity. Not knowing him to vindicate that, he became suddenly angry.

“Very ingenious. You appear to have a talent for

making life a nuisance to yourself. At the same time your passion for a grievance seems a little excessive when it comes to kicking yourself out of your home in the middle of the night. If you really have an objection to staying here, don't you think it would be simpler to discuss it rationally with me instead of making an absurd act of antagonism out of it?"

Jerry remained silent. He hated that tone of voice in his father, which made discussion on any terms impossible with him. And now a subject of discussion which defied tonal inflections between father and son. Gresham studied a seeming pose of mulish obstinacy and shrugged dispeptically.

"Oh, well, if you *must* have your antagonisms . . ."

He turned to go but at the door turned again. "All the same, you'd better unpack that bag. I'll see you about this in the morning."

Jerry listened blackly to the passage of his father's feet back to the courtyard and then leaped at the bag to snatch it shut, lock it, and shove it under the bed. So much for an act of decision.

He never once thought about Angel Puncheon: so much for the mechanics of indecision.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IN THE morning Jerry avoided breakfast and lurked in the back paddock till he heard his father's car go down the drive. As the creature of a secret egotism that forced antagonisms, he hated facing them. Punches from Dan Puncheon receded a little in the bright prosaic morning light, which was a silly time for an academic statement of rebellion in the home. He came slowly back to the drying lawn, meditating on the obduracy of affairs that would not submit life to a little arrangement.

Nina had the small car out of the garage and was cleaning it; an exercise that pleased her those days, which saw her forth every day to meet Drake in it. She hummed as she worked busily with a chamois, and Jerry stood by watching her. Without accounting for it, he was aware that a war of personality had been deleted from his relations with Nina. He approached a mudguard and leaned on it.

"I say, Nina!"

"Well?"

"Do me a favour, will you?"

"What is it?"

"Fix it up with the mater so that I can get away from home, will you?"

Nina studied this request, which also urged the statement of a completed experience somewhere.

"The fact is, Nina, I'll have to get away. I got into a row at Puncheon's over Angel:—you know what mad

coots those Puncheons are over sisters. And last night the old man found out about my dodging school; I haven't been for the last year, and I put it over him by faking the reports and he's a bit shirty about it. I told him I was going away to start making a living, but the fact is—Well, I haven't got any cash, for one thing. So would you put it to the mater. Don't tell her anything about Angel; just fix it up so that I can get away without a row. Will you?"

Nina nodded, going vastly up in Jerry's estimation by a refusal to interject derisive comment on these disclosures. "I'll see Mum about it when she's up," she said, and went on with the car.

Nina proved a sensible advocate, presenting Jerry's case as a trifle to be disposed of by being endorsed. ". . . Much the best thing to let him go. He's only cultivating enforced habits of loafing here and he'll end up by getting into the usual muddle with one of the local wenches. . . ."

Her tone implied a casual matter which overlooked her mother's brooding rejection of all such minor policies in the home. It overlooked, too, some crumpled sheets of rejected letters on the floor, and one on her mother's writing table which began without preface, "As I prefer not to discuss this business with you personally, I am writing to say finally——"

"Jerry?" said Baby, with a frown that failed to concentrate on Jerry.

"Yes. I think you ought to let him get away from here. In fact, I think everybody in this house needs a change from it. Why don't you and dad take a sea trip together?"

Baby glanced up sharply, repressing an indiscreet retort.

"Please diagnose a remedy for your own affairs," she said, which was an indiscreet retort. But she covered that by adding impatiently, "Send Jerry to me. Why couldn't he come to me himself?"

So Jerry had at least one decision ratified by arrangement, and Nina drove him into Manly that afternoon with his bag and a cheque for ten pounds, and a direction for Wally's flat in Darlington. He took one quandary in the home out of it without relieving pressure on another which Nina discussed with Drake as they sprawled on the sand that afternoon in an interlude of surfing.

"I feel embarrassed about telling them at home that I'm going too," she said.

"Well, but I'll tell them."

"It's not so much telling them—There's a bad break between them over something. I heard their voices the other night;—there was no mistaking the tone in which they spoke."

"What sort of tone?"

"Oh, a hard flinty tone; vicious. The sort of tone people use who are thoroughly sick of each other."

"People who are sick of each other don't use that tone."

"What tone do they use?"

"No tone. Fury is a protection against it."

They lolled on their bellies, elbow to elbow, secure in the prolonged intimate study of eyes.

"I can't think the poor things have really done anything, either," said Nina. "Possibly Dad's been footling in a mild way with some girl and Mum retorted Jim on him. But there was nothing in *that*, as I know well."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know Jim."

Nina allowed her eyes to reveal a moment of tender introspection as she murmured, "Poor Jim."

"Damn Jim. Look here, was it Jim——"

"Queer. Jim's vanished. Just left the garage as it stood and cleared out."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose Jim knows himself. . . ."

Gresham went about his affairs the most ill used man in the world. A degrading admission of good conscience. It reduced him to a maudlin contemplation of his lot, which he found surrounded by people who satisfied the conceit of their egos by a process which defeated his. Or at least they defeated one system of boredom by inaugurating another. Even Floyd!—

He came on Floyd and Edna outside an emporium window in which a blue carpet was displayed in the chaste company of an ash stand and a modernist blue china cat. Gresham had conceived Edna as one who lived limply in a daze of alcohol, but this was not so. Her backbone was clearly cohesive tissue, and a smart hat was clipped about her silly little head, and she was talking to Floyd in the precise tones of a saleswoman urging decision on a vacillating customer. At the sight of Gresham she swerved briskly to take a grip of his arm too.

"Just the man to settle it. Now wouldn't that blue rug go perfectly with lemon tinted walls and ultramarine velvet curtains. I was just saying to Will that with red lacquer chairs we must have a bright carpet."

Unable to back out of an exposure Floyd brazened it out as a trifle in practical utility. "Doing the camp up

a bit," he said gruffly. "No sense in letting the place go to pot."

"No sense whatever," agreed Gresham. "The blue rug by all means, Edna. And the blue cat too. Don't miss that."

"The very thing I was just thinking," said Edna sentimentally.

A glisk of malice to Gresham. All the same, behind the bluff and gruff exterior of a strong man Floyd was clearly pleased to be the harem toy of a wench with the brains of a rabbit and something of the appearance of one, too. Why, then, should submission to a wife be altogether depleted of dignity?

An impulse to sulk in town defeated itself, though he resented also catching the boat for home. The chords of the harbour bridge were about to meet, but he did not look at them. Why look at any process which assumes to reconstruct a future without promise of construction.

Across the boat his satiated eye discovered that a girl was looking at him before he discovered her to be Mildred Clint. She had another girl with her, so Gresham nodded a greeting and stayed where he was. The other girl was chattering at Mildred in a hard little one toned voice, and Mildred was nodding with the slow precision of a mandarin ornament, which showed that she was not listening. Her trance walker's eyes were on Gresham.

Abruptly Gresham got up and crossed to the seat beside her. The other girl cut a sentence in half and hitched her eyebrows at him. She was one of those slim planed down creatures that fashion plate journals produce by the million and then accuse life of having designed them.

"What a time since I've seen you, Mildred," said Gresham.

"Seen me?" exclaimed the other girl.

"Eh?" said Gresham, astonished.

Mildred came slowly to life and hung for a moment at the difficulties of speech.

"Mr. Gresham,—Miss Clint," she said.

"What! are you two girls sisters?" asked Gresham.

"Of course not," said the other girl.

"But you've got the same name."

"We haven't. My name's Mildred Clint."

Gresham held his brow for a moment, staring from that Mildred to the other.

"Then why the deuce have I been calling you Mildred Clint?" he demanded. But Mildred found that easy to explain.

"You see, you saw it in a book that Mildred lent me. It was her book. And you went on calling me it. I didn't like to put you right."

"Good Lord!" said Gresham, confused by an explanation that seemed to epitomise his phantom quest of girl. He gave that up and said helplessly to the real Mildred, "I say, will you introduce me to my friend here?"

"Gracie Adler," said Mildred Clint.

"Now I've got to learn to call you Gracie," said Gresham. Gracie nodded, implying that he had now got the affair in order. But Mildred clucked her tongue indignantly.

"Isn't that her all over?" she asked Gresham. "Get her in a jam and she stays put. If a customer doesn't like a hat, that's that to her. The money she's let walk out of our shop! Not that it matters, with no money coming into it, but what else can we expect with our

warehouse account two months overdue and me without the hide to park in there and ask for an extension of credit to pick up with on the new styles. . . .”

She rattled on, talking to Gresham across the re-christened Gracie, who appeared to be quite unaware that these revelations of disaster in a hat shop had any relation to an autobiography of a life of leisured ease in third rate fiction. By the time the boat reached Milson's Point Gresham understood that those two had been running an insufficiently capitalised hat shop which was now about to cease running. Mildred's hard capable little voice pattered figures at Gresham with the impassioned accuracy of a woman telling the details of a ruined love affair. She was still talking while he steered both girls through the crowd on the wharf and brought them to a rest on its outskirts.

“Wait a minute, now,” he said. “As far as I can see you're only fifty pounds out. Suppose I let you have a cheque for a hundred?”

Mildred grabbed his hand and pressed it with a fainting cry to her breast. “You don't mean it,” she gasped.

“Of course I do; it's a trifle.”

“What a sport,” breathed Mildred, darting ravished glances at a saint. Gresham patted her, pleased at a tribute to his worth, which was really worth paying a trifle for.

“That's all right,” he said, “I'll just get my car and run you girls home.”

“Don't bother; I'm only going to Gracie's place.”

“All right, I'll drop you at Ridge Street.”

“Ridge Street? But Gracie lives on the Point.”

Gresham clucked despair at Gracie. “Too bad, Mil

—Gracie, letting me drag you all those times to Ridge Street.”

“But you see, you asked me to come for a drive home and I couldn’t say my home was only round the corner,” explained Gracie.

“Callam Park, that’s *her* home,” said Mildred. “And listen, you know our shop;—it’s in the Strand Arcade.”

“I’ll be round there tomorrow before six. . . .”

This little episode lightened for Gresham the knowledge that dignity was still to be had on earth; at least for a reasonable sum of money. But not in the home, where dignity is not even a marketable commodity.

He dined with Baby in silence across a frozen expanse of table cloth. Nina was away, which left only the housemaid to support a rigid exclusion of speech. An honest row would have exposed less than Baby’s few quiet directions to the girl which excluded Gresham from the service of food. Perhaps she wished it understood that the pretenses which upheld that house were now done away with. If she had ordered that dinner it was as one attends to a minor detail in a process that ends it. Her coldness rejected hostility; finality dispenses with gesture. She left the table before Gresham and as he crossed the courtyard he observed a wardrobe trunk in her room and that she was sorting piles of underwear.

“Drivelling rot,” he commented peevishly to himself. “A pretense that she’s in deadly earnest. I won’t meet her on that ground. . . .”

On what ground, then? He could not decide, which left him uneasy. An emotion without an emotional idiom, and what can you do with a woman lacking that? Or do you lack it because you don’t want to do any-

thing? Very disturbing, these questions of conscience which seem bent on proving you to be an incompetent liar. He was certainly not sure next day when he went to the hat shop whether he was buying himself off from the adventure of life or buying a new share in it.

The hat shop in the Strand Arcade was a little oblong doll's house with lifesize dolls' heads cocking coquettish hats at him as he sat down at a miniature table and wrote a cheque for a hundred pounds payable to Mildred Clint, and was passionately kissed by Mildred as the substituted identity of Gracie, who looked on quite unmoved at an act of piracy with the shell of her being. Gresham saw himself being kissed by Mildred in a three angled mirror, and was smote by the awful remoteness of three benign middle aged strangers making fools of themselves between two young girls. The arm that gave Mildred's brisk young boy's body a squeeze might as well have been round one of her hat dummies. With the false *éclat* of a depressed emotion he said brightly, "Well now, you girls had better come along and have dinner with me."

The six o'clock streets were a jam with crowds trying to speed up their own hurry to catch trams and trains. A buzz of noise and light criss-crossed the senses and externalised thought. In possession of two girls' elbows, Gresham steered them across the traffic and pressed into the crowd going up King Street. "It's early for dinner," he said to Mildred. "Let us go across to Usher's for a cocktail."

He stopped abruptly, jostled by an act of recognition that did not give him time to think. Wally! Behind Wally, Jerry. Face to face with a disinherited father, Wally found the right intonation for a difficult situation on the spot.

"Hallo, Dad."

"Hallo, Wally."

Great relief. And as disposing of any assumption that there had been a need for it, Gresham said, "You know my son Wally, Gracie. This is Miss Mildred Clint, Wally. Oh yes, and this is my other son Jerry. We're just in time for a drink at Usher's."

They reached the lounge with Gresham in charge of the party and Wally in charge of its girls. He took a seat between them on a couch, which stranded Jerry and his father together across the table.

Jerry was very embarrassed. At the rebound of an act that rejected a father he now found himself grouped in a convivial pose with him. All that afternoon Wally had so analysed the father as destructive inertia on the freed action of the son that Jerry's moral debility found itself served with a cocktail when he wished to order a small beer, as the meekest excuse at hand for toping with a father. And Wally and his father were beaming at each other across glasses; two of the frankest men in the world.

"Here's luck, Dad."

"Luck to you, Wally."

"I deserve it, Dad, honestly. Within the last six weeks I've written old Bill Mallumpy's autobiography and put the last chapters of that novel into shape. I intend to finish that on the boat."

"The boat?"

"Yes, I'm sailing for England on Saturday."

"Good Lord! this is very sudden, Wally."

"Oh, no, Dad, I made up my mind some time ago. I've only waited to get enough cash for a steerage passage and a few quid to land with."

"But, Wally——"

Wally picked up a threat of destructive inertia there and waved it gracefully aside.

"No you don't, Dad. Don't worry, I'll be all right. I've arranged to do a London letter for the *Era*, so I won't be stuck for immediate cash, and for the rest, it's a matter of seeing if my work can find a publisher."

"Well, I must say, Wally, this attitude of yours is very pleasing."

It was, especially to Wally. He signalled to the waiter and waved Gresham's gesture at his pocket aside. "This is mine, Dad. First drinks I've had for six weeks. I cut it right out to get that damned job finished. But I'm off the chain tonight, anyhow. And I feel that I deserve a good night out."

At that, Gresham found himself involved with an event which posed him as a detected father in possession of a couple of stray girls, who had passively sipped their drinks while waiting to have their status determined to a seeming reunion of father and son. Already Gresham felt used up at the thought of getting through an evening in two impossible characters plus his restored friendly relations with Wally and his unknown relation to Jerry, who was exuding ill ease over a bizarre intimacy with a father and a cocktail at one impact. And the cocktail was now telling him something he urgently needed to say to his father, if words would let him say it.

But Gresham had decided to dispense with excuses for escaping, and was selecting five pound notes, which he pushed into Jerry's hand and rose.

"Listen, Wally. I was going to take these girls to dinner, but I should have to run away immediately afterwards, so I'm going to leave you in charge of them. That will be all right; I've arranged with Jerry

to pay expenses. And now, when are you coming home to say goodby to your mother before you sail?"

"I'll come tomorrow. What about meeting you at the office at five?"

"Good, I'll wait for you."

He shook hands with the girls, and received from Mildred's quick fingers the pressure of a secret compact which Gracie's limp paw knew nothing about, though her eyes followed him to the door with a vaguely troubled air. It pleased him, that valedictory tribute from a simple soul. . . .

But it was Jerry who caught him up outside the door in a sudden fluster of speech.

"Dad, wait a minute,—something I want to tell you. Listen. I didn't really clear out from home about that business; school and all that. The fact was, I got into a mix up with Dan Puncheon about his sister and if I'd stayed at Key Heights Dan would have punched my head off. That's the real reason I *had* to clear out."

"A very good reason, Jerry."

"Yes, Dad. But the point is, it wasn't anything to do with you:—I mean clearing out."

"Well, I'm glad of that, Jerry."

"Yes, Dad, I'm—I'm glad too."

They paused, embarrassed at a mutual confession, and with two abrupt nods, achieved the relief of parting. It was their first meeting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

WALLY patrolled the front room after dinner, putting everybody at ease there. His mother was curled up on the couch, his father reclined in a lounge chair, Nina idled at the verandah doors, with half her attention in the room and half outside it.

Behind his novelist's flair for innocence Wally knew very well that none of them were at ease. He sensed a suspended emotion in the way his parents spoke to him as a means of avoiding speech with each other, by Nina's vague air of politeness to him which forgot him, and by his father's selection of generalities to talk about.

“. . . All the same, Wally, this flight of your generation from Australia is a very bad thing for Australia.”

“I know,—serve the dam' place right.”

“Oh, I admit a deserved nemesis, but what about it also being a bad thing for your generation?”

“In what way?”

“Well, do you think any writer,—or any artist, can function truly outside the nationality of his birth?”

“Of course he can.”

“Well, name one who ever did.”

Wally frowned for a moment over a selection of instances and tossed them aside for a general principle of negation.

“I can name plenty who stayed at home and didn't function, for that matter,” he said. “Anyway, it's time

we got rid of rock and mud as a mental aesthetic. We are annihilating physical space today and that must destroy its mental localities too. The only locality is language and if you write English your nationality is any country where English is spoken. . . .”

He bolted with a theory which he required to believe in just then. On the couch his mother twisted impatiently, slipping a satin slipper on and off the heel of a finely tapered leg. She wore a frock of ivory lace, but her darkened eyes rejected any claim by Gresham to inspect a pretty toilet.

“But listen, Wally,” she said petulantly. “You can’t make this absurd trip without decent clothes——”

“What’s wrong with these?”

“Those! They’re in a disgusting condition.”

“They’re all right. And I’ve got a couple of black shirts and a sweater; see me through easy. The only nuisance is that I need a few good letters of introduction——”

“But I tell you that people take clothes seriously in England——”

A car came up the drive and Nina went hurriedly to the front steps. Drake’s tall figure emerged to pay off the car, which turned and went away. Gresham rose to welcome Drake, but paused, because Nina had gripped his lapels and was whispering a protest in his ear, which Drake seemed to reject. He shook his head, taking Nina by the arm to lead her inside.

Greetings were arrested by an effect of embarrassment between the two. Drake looked at Nina, who backed away and looked at him.

“Go on, get it over,” she said indignantly.

Drake turned to Gresham. “I hope it doesn’t sound

like an indecent disclosure, but Nina and I are married," he said.

"Married?" said three intonations of polite incredulity.

"Married," confessed Drake.

"Married," scoffed Nina. "And if Dinkie wasn't a thoroughly respectable Englishman he'd have let me tell the dirty truth in private instead of bringing it out in this formal way to papa and mama."

"We're very pleased to hear it under any terms," said Gresham, coming to Drake's assistance with aplomb.

"Thanks," said Drake.

Baby stared at them, refusing to commit herself to an opinion. Perhaps she saw herself already committed to it as another facet of separation in the home. Gresham smothered a hasty computation that Drake must be at least fifteen years older than Nina, and covered a disturbed emotion by saying cheerfully, "Wait till I get something to drink."

He went to the kitchen and spent an interval mixing a jug of cocktails, which he carried to the front room, putting a final aphorism to his thoughts. "After all, everyone is born too soon or too late for their own youth. Nina knows better than I do where hers dates from."

Drake was seated beside Baby on the couch and Nina was talking to Wally against the gramophone. Her politeness had lapsed a little for she was saying,

". . . It depends on your tailor. If you bring your Darlinghurst stinks to London with you I won't meet you there."

"Oh be damned;—Drake knows enough people in London to get me the sort of introductions I want."

"I won't have Dinky made responsible for my poor relations. . . ."

Drake was saying to Baby, "Be candid; you think it's a chance experiment."

"Well, isn't it?"

"No, it is not. Nina may be an experiment of mine, but I'm dashed well certain I'm no experiment of hers."

"Why are you so sure?"

"I don't need to be; she is."

"Oh, well, if she's the arbiter——"

"Of course she is. Any woman is. No man ever made a love affair or broke a love affair yet. It's entirely women's work."

"Of all the mendacious utterances. . . ."

Annoyed with Nina's disgusting snobbery, Wally opened the gramophone. A record lay on it, which he picked up and examined. It was the Tartar music from PRINCE IGOR, which he had placed there on his last visit home.

"Glad to see you people have at least had enough of jazz," he grumbled, setting the record revolving and applying the needle. Nina listened to the first bars with a surprised air, calculating a bizarre discovery. "Queer,—we haven't had a dance in this house since Jim and Ronny were here together. . . ."

She stood there meditating, glancing from her father to Drake, and biting her little finger, as people do who wish to assure the reality of their being by a sense of touch. A reverie of time factors confused her mind, as if she had lived through twenty years in the last month, and written two diaries of her life, and found their separate entities merged in one Nina.

Abruptly, that nightmare flash of staticism vanished.

She saw her mother's divided mask, which turned a polite attention to Drake and ignored her father. She saw her father's polite pretense that ignored an act of oblivion extended only to him.

Decisively, she turned to the gramophone cabinet and selected a record; imperiously, she silenced Wally's rot and replaced it with hers. "Oh hell!" protested Wally, as jazz tinpanned an insult to his ears.

"Listen," whispered Nina, "You clear out for twenty minutes and I'll promise to get you those letters of introduction."

Wally went, tripping over a rug which Nina was vigorously rolling up. At the door he turned to say, "Come into your room and have a yarn in peace, Dad."

"All right, Wally, I'll be there shortly."

The door closed on Wally. Nina had cleared the floor of rugs and now came back to take Drake by the hand.

"Just one, for luck," she said.

Drake questioned her eyes a moment and rose, and they idled down the room together in a slack embrace, though Nina was pinching a lewd Morse Code message on Drake's fingers which her eyes knew nothing about. Gresham studied her suspiciously, convinced of a shameless piece of stage management. Just as suddenly, he discovered it to be good stage management. Finishing a cocktail with precision, he put down the glass and walked across to his wife.

"Come on," he said ungraciously.

Baby darted one furious glance at him and congealed her face against any further admission that he existed. Gresham bent over her and said viciously,

"Get up or I'll dam' well pull you up."

Bewildered by an accent of outraged integrity, Baby

got up. But her face remained frozen. If she made a concession in getting up it was only to prevent a ridiculous scene. Held, but withholding herself from a tainted embrace, she traversed the floor like a figure with clockwork joints.

"Damn it, don't argue, dance," hissed Gresham.

An accent can finalise drama or puncture it for ever. Baby relaxed suddenly, and her body slid into a gracious rhythm. Her face lost its sharp contours and her eyelids drooped to cover a confession of wilful innocence. Innocence was necessary to discount Gresham's suddenly inspired ardour in the dance. Much may be done with the modern syncopation. She glanced covertly at Nina and Drake, but those two were talking as they danced, engrossed in a serious discussion. . . .

"You *are* an ass, Walter."

"Yes, Baby, it's my only virtue."







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